

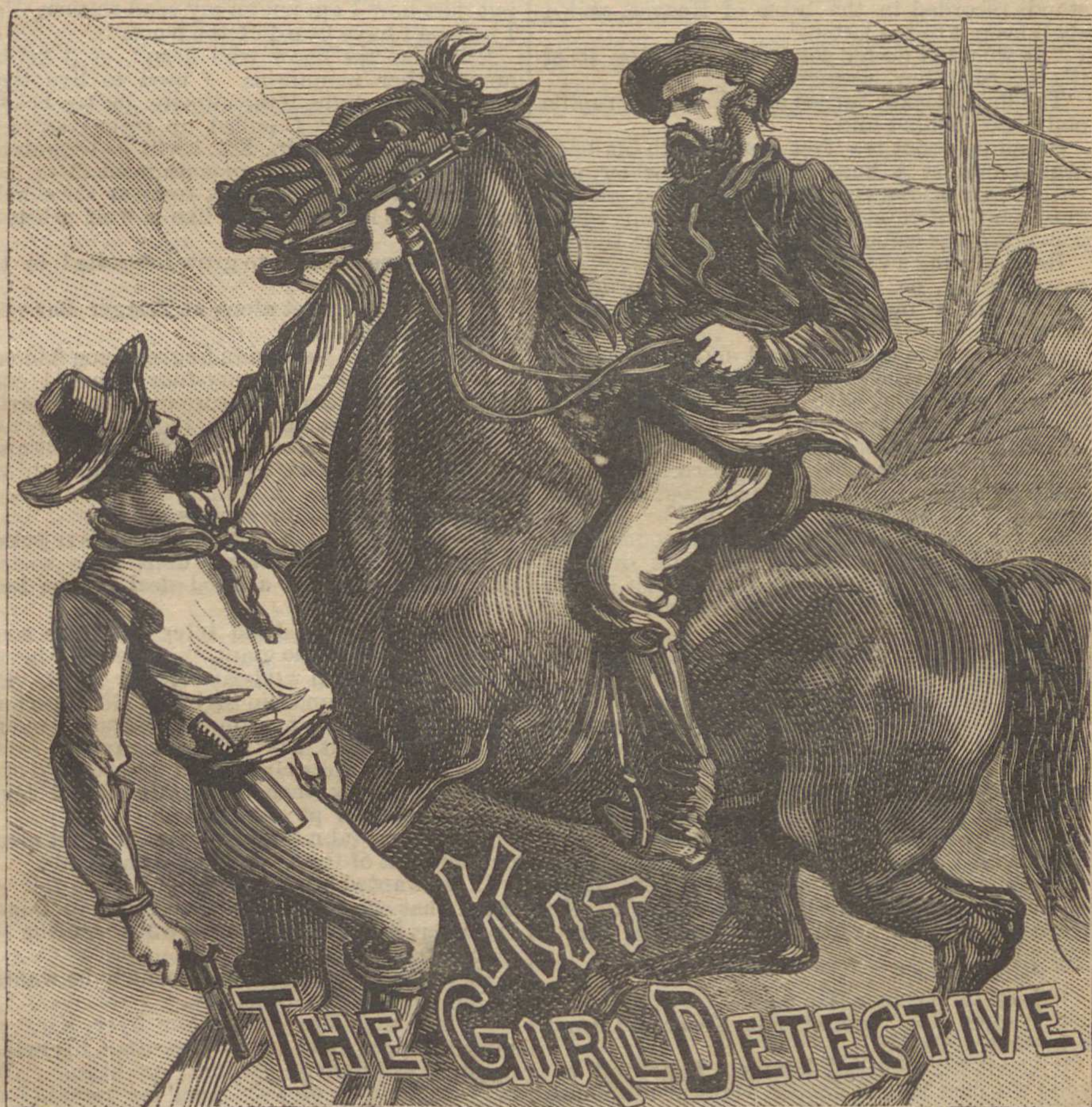
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"HELLO! STOPPED A'READY!" EXCLAIMED THE MAN ON THE STEED. "WHO AR' YE?—CYCLONE, BY HOKEY!"

Kit, the Girl Detective;

OR,

Dandy Dash in California.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "BLADE, THE SPORT," "THE DENVER DETECTIVE," "DICTIONARY NAT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BLUE-EYED DETECTIVE.

"THEY may cover their trails, but I will find them; they may hide in the fastnesses of yonder mountain, but I will ferret them out. I am here to find and to deliver them, bound hand and foot, over to avenging Justice. My oath stands recorded in the book of Heaven, and I shall keep it to the letter!"

"It wouldn't do fer yer ter go back on it ef it's recorded thar, stranger."

The first speaker turned as if a deadly reptile had hissed behind him.

Standing about ten feet away, with his back braced against a huge mountain boulder, and with a pair of Samsonian arms folded on the most ample of chests, appeared a person whose *personnel* was calculated to frighten the timid.

Besides being swarthy of skin, dark-eyed and raven-haired, he was tall and well formed, a giant, but a mountain athlete at the same time.

Armed to the teeth, like all mountaineers of his class, he presented a formidable appearance relieved by nothing save a good-natured smile that lingered at his lips after he had spoken.

"I'd keep that oath, er go under tryin'," he continued, his eyes fixed on the person whom he had surprised. "I don't know you, stranger, an' you don't know me. Mebbe it'd be the best thing fer both ov us ef we never got acquainted. I'm called Dandy Dash in this part ov ther kentry, t'nough a lookin'-glass 'd say thet I don't look much like a dandy. What's yer handle, pard?"

"Kit Keene," was the response, accompanied by a smile.

"Yer bizness, ef it's no secret?"

"Oh, I haven't much business in this part of the world," and the speaker seemed to wonder whether all his self-communings unconsciously spoken aloud, had reached the stranger's ears.

"Thet's jes' the kind o' answer I expected," said Dandy Dash. "I might hev knowed I'd git it, because I desarved it. Ez I said afore, mebbe we'd better not git acquainted, fer a feller kin hev too many friends in these diggin's. Kit Keene, eh?—never heard the name afore that I know on."

"Perhaps not."

"Goin' ter Trigger Bar, eh?"

"Trigger Bar?" echoed Kit Keene. "Am I near such a place?"

"About ten miles off, I jedge. It lies jest beyond the pass yer see yonder, right at the mouth of Sure Shot Canyon. Thar be some devils thar, Mr. Keene—some reg'lar wild-cats, men from all quarters ov the Wild West, and a young chap like you should hev friends thar if he expects ter git erlong."

Kit Keene was young.

His slightly tanned face did not proclaim him more than twenty-one, though he might have been but eighteen, for he had mild, girlish blue eyes, and long auburn hair, soft and silken like a maiden's.

Clad in close-fitting garments that would have attracted any one in that wild region with their newness, Kit Keene was certain of becoming a marked person wherever he went.

He wore at the bottom of his jacket a narrow belt that carried the silver-mounted revolver which rested on his right hip.

He did not answer the inquisitive mountaineer for a moment after the latter's volunteered remarks about the people who inhabited the place called Trigger Bar.

"I may get to the Bar some time," he said, but just now I am not on my road thither. Yes, I believe I have heard of the p'ace."

"I'd like ter know who hezn't, ef it ar' hid among ther mountains. I used to live thar, but," with a smile, "the climate got too hot for Dandy Dash, an' I pulled up stakes an' left. When I go thar ag'in, Kit, 'twill be ter enlarge ther graveyard on ther mountain-side."

Dandy Dash showed his teeth at the conclusion of his last sentence like a wolf when he snarls.

Kit Keene seemed to grow interested in the man before him.

"You couldn't get along at Trigger Bar with its people?" he said.

"Thet's it, er we couldn't agree—you kin call it what yer like. Twenty-four hours 'd cook you out down thar; I'm sure ov thet. They've got a society at the Bar thet's mighty *per-ticular* who it 'sociates with. You know it must be, Kit, when I hed to pack my traps an' v-amose the ranch."

Kit Keene could not repress a smile.

The idea of a lot of mountain roughs rejecting a man like Dandy Dash as unfit for a society like theirs, smacked a good deal of the ludicrous.

"Jes' poke your head inter the Bar some time," continued the giant, "an' see ef I hev'n't gauged them men wild-cats erbout right. I'm no angel by a thunderin' sight. I don't pertend ter be what I ain't. I'm nothin' but a mountain rough what hez pulled trigger in every camp in ther Sierras; but I'll be dogon'd ef I ain't ez good ez ther best wild-cat at Trigger Bar, morally an' physically!"

Kit Keene did not know about the first qualification, but of the second he had no doubt.

If he wanted an ally he might have felt assured that one could have been found in Dandy Dash, but he made no move toward securing the giant's friendship.

He probably had secrets to which he wanted no human being to penetrate.

"I see thet I'm keepin' yer hyer, Kit," resumed Dandy Dash, a moment after his rather boastful estimate of his good qualities. "We may meet ag'in, ef ye'r' goin' ter remain long in this kentry; but let me caution you once more, for ye'r' younger than I be, thet the climate's mighty onhealthy fer some peoble, 'specially fer them ther wild-cats ov Trigger Bar don't like."

"I thank you for your information," said Kit, as he stepped toward the mountaineer, and extended his hand. "I may profit by it during the days that are to come, for I am free to say that I propose to remain some time in this country. I shall not be averse to meeting you again."

He was still speaking when Dandy Dash's brawny arms unfolded, and a great bronzed hand covered his whiter and much smaller member.

"I think I could tie ter yer, Kit, by hokey I do!" exclaimed Dandy Dash, looking the youth squarely in the eyes as he squeezed his hand. "But we mightn't pull together long, fer I've got ways ye wouldn't like, though I'd soon git use' ter yourn. Ef you hev got a man's name you've got a gal's hand, an' a gal's eyes an' ha'r."

A slight flush suffused Kit Keene's temples, but it quickly disappeared as if he held good control over himself.

The next moment he withdrew his hand from Dandy Dash's grasp, and stepped back.

"Of one thing I am certain," he said. "Come what may, we shall never be foes."

"Never! That's not in the nature ov things!" exclaimed the rough. "I've been a man without a pard fer five years, but I've got erlong tolerably well in spite ov thet. Good-by, Kit. Steer cl'ar ov Trigger Bar; but ef yer bizness takes ye thar, keep yer eyes peeled, fer ther place ar' rightly named, an' it lies jes' whar it oughter—at ther mouth ov Sure Shot Canyon."

With this Dandy Dash turned away with the air of a man who believes that he has given some good advice, and that he can not add anything thereto.

Kit Keene bade him good-morning in a half-regretful tone, and a minute later he stood alone on the lofty mountain plateau that overlooked some of the wildest country among the Sierras.

"Ought I to have let that fellow slip?" he asked himself in an audible tone. "I might want a friend here before long, especially if I have to deal with the rough characters of Trigger Bar. I have come hither for the purpose of trailing certain men, and if my trail leads to the Bar, why, thither I go. He called himself Dandy Dash. I will not forget him. I do not think I should have let him go as I have done."

Mentally regretting his action, the youth started down the path just traversed by the mountaineer, and traveled it some distance without catching sight of the person he had so strangely encountered.

"Well, let him go. I'll play the game alone," he said, as he paused and turned back. "The oath I have taken I will keep alone. I have reached the threshold of my future operations. Kit Keene, you stand at the open door of the wild Shasta region, a person with a determined purpose and oath-bound. This is a good place for you to renew your vow. Renew it!"

The youth drew off his hat with his left hand and elevated his right as he turned his face upward toward the blue skies of early summer that stretched above him.

"Hear me, Heaven, and record my oath again!" he exclaimed. "I have suffered and I shall avenge! I swear to hunt the Lasso League

down and hand them one and all over to the merciless hands of California justice! I am here, a mountain detective, on a trail which I will not leave until the end has been reached. If necessary, I will shoot my way to triumph! I will not be turned back by a thousand Trigger Bars! Help me, Heaven, and visit me with thy vengeance if I fail to keep my oath!"

The youth's hand dropped at his side, and when his face was lowered there were flashes in the eyes which a few moments since were as blue and mild as a summer sky.

The oath had been taken with great sincerity of purpose.

Kit Keene, the young Mountain Detective, was resolved to keep it to the letter.

He was alone in the deadly Shasta country where quarrels were settled with the revolver and the bowie.

Straight ahead lay the majestic mountains that hemmed in the theater of future events.

They hid from his eyes Trigger Bar and its denizens—the "human wild-cats" of Dandy Dash's narrative.

For several minutes after the oath, Kit Keene stood on the plateau and gazed across the rough valley that lay between him and the dimly-discerned outlines of Sure Shot Canyon.

All at once he started forward like a person eager to reach a certain place.

"I'm here on business, and I'm eager to get at it. Kit Keene, waking or sleeping, you must not forget your oath."

Three minutes later the scene of the strange meeting we have witnessed was entirely deserted.

CHAPTER II.

MOONSHINE AND HIS PARD.

"PUT on another bar'l an' ther pup will cl'ar ther pile! Thar's no discount on my jumpin' pard. I say, Strawberry, hev'n't ye got another whisky-bar'l? Trot out one more, an' complete ther pyramid. I'll back my pard with all I've got."

These words were spoken by a rough-looking individual, who toward the close of the day that followed the one with which we dealt in the foregoing chapter, leaned against a slab shanty, and faced a pyramid of whisky-barrels which had been erected in front of it.

He was listened to by perhaps thirty men, mountaineers like himself, the inhabitants of the collection of shanties which, collectively, gloried in the name of Trigger Bar.

The man called Strawberry assured the confident speaker that the last empty barrel in his possession had been taken to complete the pyramid, and he wound up his remarks by saying that he "didn't think thar war a livin' crittur spry enough to cl'ar ther pile."

"I say thar ar'!" vociferated the man who leaned against the shanty as he started forward. "I'm backin' my pard, boys. I know it's a bar'l higher than he ever tackled; but I say he kin do it. I'm not overly flush, but what I hev got I put up without a growl. Ef I lose you rake in ther pot, but I run ther risk. Put up, er shut up! Take yer choice, men ov Trigger Bar!"

In less time than we can record a sentence,

Strawberry, the red-faced whisky magnate of the Bar, had produced a weighty sack of dust, which the confident man instantly covered.

Side bets were also made, and it was noticed that those who professed confidence in the first speaker's words put up their wealth with but little enthusiasm.

"Trot out yer jumpin' pard, Moonshine," sounded on every side. "All ther dust at ther Bar has been put up, an' some ov us 'll hev ter strike new veins fer ter make a raise. Whar's yer jumper?"

"I'll get 'im! He's in ther shanty in good condition, an' ef he can't jump thet pyramid, by Jumbo! I'll kill 'im."

Moonshine hurried off, but soon reappeared, followed, not by a man, but by a large, supple-limbed panther, whose neck was encircled with a gold collar which, as everybody at Trigger Bar knew, had cost the rough a journey to San Francisco, besides a goodly outlay of dust in the city.

A strange affinity connected the lives of these two strange pards of Trigger Bar.

They were inseparables, and one was known as well as the other.

A light cheer greeted the panther's appearance as he glided over the ground with velvet tread, and with his eyes almost constantly fixed on his master's face.

"Bets all up pards?" asked Moonshine, halting about thirty yards from, and directly in front of the pyramid of barrels that blocked the narrow street.

"All up, Moonshine. Let your pard sail in."

Moonshine stopped and unlocked the golden collar from the neck of the beast, which had crouched in the dust, and was eying the barrels with the eagerness of an animal used to the kind of trials to which he was about to be subjected.

"Do yer duty, Santa," whispered Moonshine. "Thar's one more bar'l than yer ever tackled. I've put my last ounce on yer, an' I want ye ter win."

The beautiful beast seemed to understand his master; he turned his head and threw into Moonshine's eyes a look of assurance that must have imparted new confidence.

The rough's bronzed hand stroked the panther's head as he rose.

"Up an' at 'em, Santa!" exclaimed Moonshine. "Cl'ar ther pile, an' bu'st Strawberry an' his backers. Go!"

Not until the last word left Moonshine's lips did the crouching animal move.

All at once he shot forward in a grand leap, and the next moment he was flying toward the pyramid.

Everybody held their breath.

Suddenly the panther left the ground, shot upward through mid-air, as it were, and cleared the topmost barrel with the ease of a practiced *voltigeur*, coming down on the opposite side as noiselessly as a falling snow-flake!

A cheer that made the mountains ring greeted this triumph.

Those who had staked their funds against Moonshine's confidence added their cheers to those of the winners.

A rush was made for the panther, but his

master was ahead of all, and a moment later the beast reared on his hind feet to be joyfully pressed to Moonshine's bosom.

"Stand back!" he shouted to the demonstrative crowd. "I want ter show yer thet Santa kin do thet every day ov ther week. Hyer, pup; show yer pards thet thet jump war no all-day job."

The panther followed him eagerly down the road, and turned toward the pyramid at his bidding.

Again he bounded toward the barrels, shot suddenly through the air, cleared the topmost one without touching a hair, and came down on the other side.

"Thar's not another Santa in ther world!" cried Moonshine, proudly. "He kin do more than jump pyramids. Thar! pick up thet collar."

Moonshine had cast the golden collar on the ground, and was pointing at it while he faced the crowd.

About five feet from the shining necklace crouched the panther, his two glittering eyes a challenge and a menace, and his sleek tail moving slowly from side to side.

"I've won Strawberry's dust, but I'll give it an' my stake to ther man what picks up thet collar," continued Moonshine. "Thar ain't a bein' in Californy gritty enough ter pick up thet necklace. It shall b'long henceforth to ther man, woman er boy what lifts it from ther ground."

The men of Trigger Bar exchanged glances, but not one moved.

"I'm ther only man able to do thet little job!" exclaimed Moonshine, as his bronzed face seemed to flush with pride. "I took Santa from his mother when I first got him, an' I calkerlate it took a man ter do thet, ef I do say it myself. Yes, sir, I say thet, besides Moonshine, ther man doesn't live what kin pick up thet collar an' boast ov ther feat."

"Thar's a chap ye hev'n't asked, Moonshine."

"Whar?"

"Comin' yonder."

An instant later every eye was fixed on the person who was advancing from toward the mouth of Sure Shot Canyon.

"What! thet dandy clipper pick up Santa's collar?" exclaimed Moonshine, derisively, after he had eyed the new-comer for a moment. "Don't try to give me taffy, pards. But I'll tackle ther sunflower when he comes up."

By this time the unexpected visitor to Trigger Bar had entered the town.

He was a young man with mild blue eyes and a profusion of auburn hair which, escaping from under his almost jaunty hat, lay full of youthful sunshine on his shoulders.

All at once the mountaineer cleared with a bound the space between him and the new-comer.

"I don't know what yer name is, youngster, an' I don't care!" he cried. "Ef you hev any grit, hyer's the place ter test it. I'm Moonshine, and yonder's my pard," he was pointing toward the panther. "I say boldly in the presence ov ther men ov Trigger Bar, thet you hev'n't grit enough ter pick up the collar lying yonder on the ground."

The eyes of the youth flashed.

"Show yer grit ef yer keep ther article!" he continued as derisively as before. "Celebrate yer comin' ter Trigger Bar by doin' suthin', er turn yer back on a yaller pup an' his collar. Take yer choice."

"I'll pick up the collar if you insist," he said, returning Moonshine's glance with one of strange calmness. "I've made it a rule of life never to let a man outdare me."

He stepped toward the waiting panther as he uttered the last word.

His eyes and those of the beast met.

"I said he shouldn't make a fool ov himself, an' he sha'n't!" suddenly roared a voice that was heard by all, and a burly mountaineer, whose right hand clutched a cocked revolver, landed in front of the daring boy.

Moonshine turned with a growl and an oath upon the interferer.

"It warn't yer put-in, Cyclone!" he grated.

The answer was delivered in a glance, and the man called Cyclone planted himself firmer on the ground where he had alighted.

"Don't interfere!" said the youth in a tone intended only for Cyclone's ears. "Let me teach that panther's pard that he has mistaken his man. I can master that crouching brute, if not with my eye, with this thing here."

He drew his revolver, a silver-mounted one, with the last word.

"I can't—I won't!" replied Cyclone. "What's yer name, boy?"

"Kit Keene."

"Wal, Kit Keene, my private advice is thet ther sooner ye leave Trigger Bar the better it'll be fer yer health."

CHAPTER III.

TRACKED AND UNMASKED.

MOONSHINE and Cyclone—Cyclone Tom he was sometimes called—were not enemies.

They had been allies in more than one mountain brawl, but each had peculiar views of his own for the active exercise of which nobody was ever consulted.

They were not going to fall out now.

Moonshine eyed for a moment the determined man who had thrown himself between Kit and the panther's collar, then he moved forward considerably cooled down.

At the same time the panther, as if seeing that the golden necklace was not to be contested for, bounded forward, picked it up, and bore it toward his master.

"Mebbe Cyclone acted sensible in not lettin' you go fer ther collar," said Moonshine, addressing the youth, who had quietly slipped the revolver back to its place. "I rather guess ther purp would hev come out ov ther tussle first best, and ye'r' rather young ter die thet way."

During Moonshine's remarks he found Kit's blue eyes fastened upon him in an inquisitive manner.

"I don't know about that," he said with a smile. "Your panther, sir, is not the first I have encountered."

Moonshine eyed Kit from head to foot.

His look from under his heavy eyebrows was a close scrutiny, which the Girl Detective stood without flinching.

"Ther other panthers ye saw didn't hurt yer, I reckon," the mountain bully remarked slowly, and in a tone of voice calculated to irritate the youth.

"They did not, because I didn't give them a chance!" replied Kit proudly. "I'm pretty good on getting the drop on an enemy."

"Eh? Good on ther drop?" echoed Moonshine. "Mebbe ye'll need yer pistol l'arnin', ef ye stay long at Trigger Bar."

To this Kit made no reply, but ran his eye through the crowd that had congregated about him as if seeking a familiar face.

He stood in the midst of a lot of men known throughout the entire Sierra Nevada region.

Dandy Dash had aptly termed them "human wild-cats," and Kit was now ready to believe that he spoke from actual observation.

If the young detective's oath did not require a visit to Trigger Bar, why had he walked into the power of its lawless denizens?

He stood the eye-scrutiny to which he was subjected by the entire crowd without flinching.

It was certainly a hard lot.

The only one who had attempted to befriend him was Cyclone Tom, but in doing so the rough had evinced no friendship.

"Thet boy'll do ter tie ter in a pinch," remarked Cyclone Tom, eying him from a distance.

"What's that, Cyclone?"

It was Moonshine who put the question.

"I don't agree with yer," was Moonshine's answer when the opinion had been repeated for him. "I wish thet gal-faced youngster hed never invaded ther Bar. He's an evil genius. Don't yer remember how well we got along in ther Los Pinos kentry till thet Bridger family came inter camp? Thar war a boy in it thet looked like thet spring pink; I b'lieve he war purtier nor his sister, ther gal they called Eva. That war twenty year ago, Cyclone, an' we're not all dead yet. Ther gal, ther only one what war spared thet night, didn't keep her oath worth a cent."

"That's so, but I hev'n't thought ov her fer a long time," said Cyclone, whose eyes wandered to Kit, who was talking with several men, by whom he was pretty rapidly plied with questions. "Since you've called them times back, Moonshine, I recollect ther message somebody sent ter our camp shortly arter thet night when we got rid ov ther heft ov ther Bridger family."

"Ther gal did it."

"I never b'lieved anything else. We got ther Boston miner ter read the letter—he was ther only chap in camp what could wrastle with written language, yer know—an' thet night he turned up missin', an' never did come back."

Moonshine smiled.

"He b'lieved thet ther gal would carry out what thet paper said," he replied, cutting his smile off. "But nothin' ever grew out ov it. The oath on thet ar' paper never amounted ter shucks. Arter we get rid ov ther Bridgers we prospered ag'in—flush times struck us, an' kept us at high-water mark till we left ther old camp."

"Because ther State took a hand in ther game."

"Mebbe so, Cyclone. Californy got in dead earnest fer once. Thet might hev been ther gal's work, but we never knowed fer certain. Arter she left camp she run across a young chap somewhere near Sacramento, an' took his name. But I've been eying thet chap yonder because he made me think ov Eva Bridger. He's got her eyes an' her face, but he's not her brother, because the brother never left Camp Nugget alive. Them Bridgers war ther Jonabs ov ther old camp, but thet spring pink shall never become ours hyer!"

Moonshine's lips closed determinedly behind the last word.

"Ef he's eager ter try a brush with Santa hyer," and he smoothed the head of the panther that stood at his side, "he shall be accommodated whenever he gits ready."

By this time Kit's bronzed questioners had seemingly exhausted themselves, and the youth manifested an intention of withdrawing from the place.

"He kin turn in with me fer to-night," said Cyclone Tom, stepping forward, much to Moonshine's displeasure. "It 'd never do ter let 'im go on an' face Injuns an' b'ar in ther Mountains."

"Take 'im in," growled Moonshine half under his breath. "Thet's jes' ther way you treated ther Bridgers at first, but not long arter ye war glad ter help clean 'em out."

Five minutes later Kit Keene had crossed the threshold of a shanty a few yards from the saloon, and a fat-lamp showed him its rude interior.

"Well, I'm in Trigger Bar," he said to himself, for Cyclone Tom had left him with an invitation to "turn in" whenever he desired. "Dandy Dash gauged these men about right. What have I discovered?—anything?"

He paused for a moment and stepped to the door as if he had heard a suspicious sound.

"It was nothing," he said, after listening a moment with his ear near the rough wooden latch. "I know that I am on the right trail. I am in the camp inhabited by some of the men I want, but by how many of them I do not know. Twenty years makes many changes in human life, especially in California where men carry their hearts on the points of their daggers. I am confident that Moonshine could, if he would, tell a bloody story of a certain Christmas night in the Los Pinos country. I'm not so sure about Cyclone Tom, but why not him, too? The two men are pards and it is evident that they are old friends. Mother, I am on the right trail, but my hour for vengeance has not has arrived. I feel that I am going to carry out the oath I have registered above!"

A moment later he opened the door and looked out.

Night had fallen since he entered the cabin, but he could still see the numerous shanties that comprised the homes of the lawless men of Trigger Bar.

All at once his eyes caught sight of an object that seemed to be crouching in the uncouth street which the cabin fronted.

It was about forty feet from the door, and the lamp that burned at his back caused two glittering eyes to stand revealed.

A thought of Moonshine's velvet-footed pard crossed his mind.

"The big cat may be tracking me," he said to himself. "He may be playing detective at his master's bidding. I have been tracked by panthers before, but never by an edicated one."

While he spoke the object moved; it came to ward him.

In another instant all doubts of its identity were dissolved.

It was Santa, the panther!

"I could check your course where you are," continued Kit, instinctively drawing and cocking his revolver.

"You sneaking woods cat, I ought to send a bullet through your brain just to teach Moonshine that I am not to be tracked with impunity."

Inch by inch, uttering no cry and making no noise, the panther advanced over the trail lately made by the Mountain Detective in coming to the shanty.

"Move off!" suddenly exclaimed Kit, leaning over the threshold.

That instant the gliding beast stopped and crouched with his yellowish belly in the dust.

The glowing eyeballs were now fixed upon him, and the sleek tail moved from side to side as if the panther was about to leap upon him.

"Go back to your master and save your hide," continued Kit, "I don't want your blood but I may want Moonshine's. What! are you going to force me to fight?"

The last sentence was called forth by the sudden discovery that the beast had resumed his noiseless crawl.

"I swore that I would shoot my way to the men I hunt if necessary!" grated Kit, raising the revolver and covering the fiery eyeballs. "That part of my oath I will keep, if it brings all Trigger Bar down upon me!"

His eye went down the gleaming pistol barrel; steadier hand than his never clutched a deadly weapon.

"You will not halt—then by heavens! Moonshine loses a pard!"

His finger was at the trigger—it was even pressing it as his compressed lips told, when a figure leaped between him and the panther, and a hand fell across the revolver barrel.

"The blood of that pard means your life!" said a voice. "For heaven's sake put up your weapon and leave the Bar if you want to see another day."

Kit could hardly repress a cry of astonishment.

He was confronted by a youth of his own age, and a person whom he had never met before.

"Who are you?" fell naturally from his lips.

"Cyclone Tom's brother—Sierra Phil," was the answer. "But don't question me. I am here to tell you that safety lies in flight. It isn't cowardice to fly from the wild men ov Trigger Bar after they have drank thirteen rounds at Strawberry's counter. Look! the panther is gone—back to his master, an' you must go, too. Moonshine will make it another Bridger affair if you stay."

The name of Bridger made Kit recoil.

"My God! they shall never do that!" he exclaimed. "I will go, but I will come again. I

don't know whether I dare call you my friend, Sierra Phil, because—"

"Call me friend," was the interruption. "I will never go back on a *girl* in your situation."

Kit uttered a startling cry.

"Never fear! I'll not betray you!" said Sierra Phil.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RED AVENGER.

THE Mountain Detective's exclamation told that Sierra Phil's shaft had hit the mark.

A deep flush suffused Kit's cheeks, but Sierra Phil's words were reassuring:

"Never fear; I will not betray you!"

For a moment afterward neither spoke, but gazed silently into each other's face.

"You say you will leave Trigger Bar," suddenly said Phil. "I am glad of that. I have feared for your safety ever since I first set eyes on you, and that was never before to-day. If it hadn't been for Cyclone Tom, I guess you'd have been drawn into a tussle with that panther, but he didn't interfere from any love of you. Hark! the men at Strawberry's have left the den; they're out in the open air once more. You mustn't stay here another minute. I don't know what fetched you to the Bar, but I've an idea. You say you will come back if you go away. I've nothin' to say to that, but you must go now!"

"Agreed, Sierra Phil. I'm at home among the mountains. I've spent most of my life there."

In another minute the youth who had proclaimed himself Cyclone Tom's brother was leading Kit down the main thoroughfare of Trigger Bar.

He did not resemble his kinsman in the least.

Cyclone's face was hard and almost the color of bronze; Sierra Phil's was youthful and nearly fair.

If he was the mountaineer's brother, thirty years must have yawned between their ages.

Not another word was spoken by the young couple until the shanties of Trigger Bar had disappeared, and they stood face to face a mile from the mouth of Sure Shot Canyon, with the lofty peaks of the Sierras towering above them, and nature at her roughest on either side.

"You have unmasked me to-night," said Kit, catching Sierra Phil's eye. "You know that I am a woman. Now answer me truly one question, which I know will imply a doubt: Are you really Cyclone Tom's brother?"

"If I were not his brother would the men of the Bar have risked so much for me?"

"I don't know," said Kit. "Some of those very men have done strange things before."

"If you don't like to call me Cyclone Tom's brother, call me something else," resumed Sierra Phil, with a smile.

"I will call you Sierra—nothing else," was the reply.

"I am satisfied, an' I will call you Kit, even though I know you must have another name. This mountain trail leads to the Oregon border. It winds round the base of Mount Shasta and—But you know where you're goin', an' as much about this trail as I do, no doubt. I can't guide

you any further. I can do you more good back yonder than here. We must separate, Kit."

Sierra Phil held out both hands, as he uttered the last four words.

His eyes, full of anxiety, if nothing more, told that he was parting reluctantly from the blue-eyed detective.

They might never meet again.

In the silence of the night their hands touched, and their eyes met once more.

"Forget your promise to come back to Trigger Bar an' go on," said Sierra Phil, in tones that attested his feelings. "Safety for you lies beyond the borders of Oregon. It is worth your life to remain in this country, while Moonshine an' his velvet-clawed pard live. Take the advice of a friend, Kit. Don't stop until you have reached the new State that lies far beyond the northernmost shadows of Shasta."

Sierra Phil pressed Kit's hands and turned away as though afraid to hear the reply.

"I thank you," said the detective, "but I am here for a purpose. Were half of the denizens of Trigger Bar Moonshines and the others Santas, I would not fly to Shasta's shadows!"

"You may rue those words."

"Be the blame with me!"

"Heavens! girl, what a mission of vengeance you must have," cried Sierra Phil. "I cannot conceive what could make you hate as you do, but don't tell me. I don't want your secret, an' I will not listen to it if you begin. Go! go! an' forget the oath you must have taken some time. May Heaven give you safe trails. I'm off for the wild-cats' lair again."

The youth turned his back on Kit with the last word, and hurried off before a reply could be framed by the astonished detective.

He did not keep the trail more than a moment, but plunged into the dense chaparral and vanished.

The mountain winds drowned the sound of his footsteps and Kit was alone.

"He had the sharpest eyes of all of them," said the detective. "I thought my disguise complete, but a boy penetrates it at a glance and tells me so. What have I done? I have fled from the men of Trigger Bar. I have left the trail of vengeance behind me. What do the spirits of the dead think of me for this? I will play faint heart no longer. I will never turn my back on the enemy again. I told the boy that I would return to Trigger Bar, and I will keep my word."

But instead of moving toward the lawless camp from which she had just fled, Kit walked slowly toward the north.

The mountains seemed to hem her in, and in a short time her figure was lost among the rough peaks of the Sierras.

All at once the slight whinny of a horse saluted her ears.

She stopped and listened.

From a point some distance in advance came the sounds of an approaching troop of horsemen.

Kit crept against the rocks that formed one side of the mountain trail, and for the third time that eventful night drew her revolver.

"None o' thet—no shootin' hyer, Kit," said a voice at her elbow, and as she whirled upon the

speaker with a light cry, she beheld a face which, despite the place and the hour, she instantly recognized.

"Dandy Dash!"

"It's nobody else," was the answer. "Been ter Trigger Bar, eh?"

"Yes."

"An' left on account of yer health, ez I did?"

The girl detective's eyes sought the ground.

"Come! I knowed it war powerful onhealthy thar," Dandy Dash went on. "I'm glad thet you hed sense enough ter leave afore you got Moonshine set ag'in' ye. An' Cyclone! What did thet skunk say?"

"I owe him my life perhaps."

"Never pay ther debt, Kit—never pay it! Never even offer it ter thet yaller skunk er he'll take it. You saw the hull crowd, I s'pose?"

"Yes."

"Moonshine's pard too?"

"Yes."

"They're the boss pards ov this kentry, in some respects. Moonshine an' Santa ar' known miles an' miles from Trigger Bar. Yer oughter hev seen the animile jump."

"I saw him."

"Over a pyramid ov Strawberry's tamarack bar'ls?"

"Yes."

"Then you witnessed one ov ther divarsions ov the Bar. Santa didn't make the leap once though Moonshine told you that he never went back on the pyramid, I 'spect. I left Trigger Bar shortly arter thet; I guess I hed ter," and Dandy Dash smiled. I corraled all ther bets I could thar one day on Santa's jumpin' qualities. I war flush an' so war Trigger Bar. The day rolled round an' Moonshine trotted his jumpin' cat out, but the old feller warn't in trim; he couldn't git ther hang ov his pins. He tried to jump ther bar'ls, but he couldn't leave ther ground. I hed dosed 'im! Ov course I hed ter git out ov Trigger Bar, an' I left my dust behind jes' ez ef them human wild-cats back yonder had won ther bets. By hokey! Kit, it 'd hev done ye good to hev seen Moonshine blubber over thet sick pard ov his'n. He acted like a crazy man. I hev'n't been back since, but I'm goin' thar. I wouldn't be Dandy Dash ef I didn't remind Moonshine an' his pards thet they've got fifty ounces of dust thet b'longs to me."

Dandy Dash concluded with a look that told Kit that he would some day carry out his resolution, that he would seek a collision with the desperadoes of Trigger Bar.

Before the girl could reply, however, the mountaineer darted forward, cocking his revolver as he executed the movement, and uttering a low note of warning.

"Horses!—I heard them some time ago!" said Kit, catching the sounds which had startled Dandy Dash.

"Injuns!" was the low reply. "I guess thar'll be unexpected visitors at the Bar afore mornin'."

The story of the desperadoes' fierce onslaught on the tribe that had refused to give Sierra Phil up and the long-threatened retaliation, rushed across the Girl Detective's brain.

"They sha'n't cheat me out of my vengeance!" she exclaimed, clutching Dandy Dash's arm.

"An arrow shall never prevent me from keeping my oath!"

"What will you do, Kit? The nearest red-skin ain't forty yards down yonder."

"I'm glad of that! I will meet them the sooner."

The mountaineer stared into the fair speaker's face as if he believed her on the verge of lunacy. Suddenly she threw herself forward.

"Don't be a fool, Kit!" he exclaimed, bounding after her. "Over Red Robe's body three thousand red-skins swore to clean out Trigger Bar, root an' branch."

But the agile girl was beyond the reach of his arm.

Undaunted by nothing, for the old mountaineer's words must have been heard, she went rapidly down the trail.

When she halted it was a few feet in advance of a number of horses that almost blocked the trail, and at sight of her more than a score of plumed Indians uttered startling cries and fitted arrows to the bowstring.

"Shoot!" exclaimed Kit, as she folded her arms upon her bosom, and calmly faced the red invaders, the loveliest target imaginable. "Kill me where I stand and slay one who hates the men of Trigger Bar with a hatred an Indian's heart can never know. Vengeance can make us friends!"

CHAPTER V.

SHOOTING HER WAY TO REVENGE.

RECKLESS as he was, Dandy Dash held his breath.

He expected to hear the twang of Indian bowstrings, and to see the blue-eyed detective stagger back, pierced by twenty arrows.

"I've faced Injuns myself, but I wouldn't do thet," passed the mountaineer's mind. "If thet's the way ye'r' goin' to run things in this kentry, my posey, ye'll stop short mighty soon an' never try it again."

But not a bowstring twanged, and the girl detective faced the astonished red-skins unburt.

A few feet behind her Dandy Dash stood among the dark shadows of the rocks with a ready revolver in his hand.

Suddenly one of the Indians left the band and urged his horse toward Kit.

The shaft held against the bowstring by two fingers was drawn back to its iron barb.

"Pale boy no shoot," he suddenly exclaimed, and quicker than a flash he was on the ground and confronted Kit.

In another minute a dozen of his companions had followed his example, and Dandy Dash saw Kit surrounded by the red avengers—the men who were undoubtedly on the trail that led to Trigger Bar.

"A youngster with grit like that will git through!" said the mountaineer as he gazed on the scene before him. "He's able ter help himself, but ef them red devils lift a hand ag'in' 'im I'll take stock in the rumpus."

Kit, the girl detective, was an object of much curiosity to the Indians.

Red hands were run through her long hair, and believing her to be a boy, they felt her arms and nodded approvingly.

All this time a strange smile played with Kit's lips.

"What brings White Face to Shasta country?" asked the leader of the band.

The girl's eyes glistened that moment.

"Vengeance!" she exclaimed. "What takes the red warriors to the south?"

"Scalps!—the scalps of the dark men who invaded the Indians' camp many moons ago. Does White Face live there?"

"No! Did I not tell you that my trail, like yours, is one of vengeance?"

"True! Gray Arrow forgot."

"I never forget!" flashed Kit. "Were I to forget my mission for a moment, I would ask Heaven to punish the oath-breaker. Gray Arrow, go back. Let me strike first, let me fulfill my mission—then come down upon Trigger Bar with your braves. I will leave scalps enough for you."

The Indian leader shook his head.

Kit advanced a step and suddenly laid her hand on Gray Arrow's naked arm.

"Go back!" she repeated. "Leave this trail and hunt the buffalo until I come to you and say, 'Trigger Bar and its human wolves belong wholly to you.' I will not keep you from the path of vengeance a great while—but a few days at the most. Gray Arrow, I have suffered at the hands of certain men in yon camp. You will say to me that your tribe has suffered also. I know that, but the blow fell upon my head even before I was born. You cannot say that; nay, your wrongs do not date back almost twenty years. I will not touch a man who did not belong to the famous Lasso League that cursed the Los Pinos country years ago. My trail leads to no others. Go back and let me hunt them down. Give me a week—but seven days! I will not ask another hour. Then I will leave the whole trail to you. One week, Gray Arrow."

Kit's hand left Gray Arrow's arm with her last word, and she stepped back with her eyes fixed anxiously on the Indian's face.

"White Face shall have his days," he said, suddenly. "Gray Arrow and his braves will wait till they end at the foot of Shasta."

The girl detective seemed to spring forward.

She had carried her point; the red avengers would withhold their blow from Trigger Bar until she had ferreted out and dealt with certain miscreants supposed to dwell there!

The tones in which Gray Arrow announced his decision told that it would be adhered to.

A murmur of disappointment ran through his band.

"Warriors, to the trail of the buffalo and the bear!" he said, wheeling upon them. "In the shadows of the Manitou's mount, we will wait for the white trailer who was struck by the wolves of Trigger Bar long before their teeth tore the flesh of our people. Back from the war-path. We will grow strong in the hunt till seven days have passed."

As he finished, the Indian held out his hand in which Kit placed her fingers.

"Gray Arrow's word is good. He will wait seven days for White Face."

"I shall not ask another hour. At the end of that time you and your braves may tread the war-path again."

Gray Arrow turned toward his horse and waved his warriors back.

The Mountain Detective did not move until the entire band had disappeared toward the north.

"By hokey! I never thought you'd turn that pack back," exclaimed a voice as Dandy Dash, the silent spectator of the whole scene, alighted at her side.

"I was afraid that I would fail," answered Kit, letting slip a long breath of relief. "But fortune favors me. Gray Arrow will keep his word."

"He will, but I wouldn't like to vouch for his braves doing it."

"What?"

"You can't trust an Injun brave. Ther most ov them war young bucks, hot-headed rascals, what hev smelt blood fer ther first time."

"Will they go to Trigger Bar?"

"I wouldn't trust 'em, I say."

"Let them try it!" exclaimed Kit. "They may meet me between here and the camp. I will warn Moonshine and his pards of Gray Arrow's proximity."

"Arter treatin' with the Injun as ye hev! Would thet be doin' ther fair thing, Kit?"

"No," said Kit instantly. "I will not warn the Bar, but I will keep the trail clear of Indians."

"By Jumbo! you've got a big contract on yer hands. My opinion is thet ye'll hev ter begin on it to-night!"

"Why to-night?"

"Because them young bucks will give you trouble."

"I am ready for them!"

Dandy Dash gazed admiringly into the girl's face for a moment.

"If thar's anything I like, it's grit!" he exclaimed. "But thar's a sart'in kind thet never does a feller much good."

"The kind I possess, you think!" said Kit smiling.

"Did I say so, Kit?"

"No; but—"

"But I think so. I'll be plain with yer, boy. I wish yer hadn't fetched so much grit along with yer inter this kentry. I kin imagine how badly ye want ter pay certain men wild-cats fer a job which I calkerlate war done years ago, but I'd let them Injuns hev their way."

"And rob me of my revenge, Dandy Dash?—never!"

The old mountaineer said no more.

He was satisfied that argument would not change Kit's intentions; that nothing could turn the youth from the trail of vengeance.

"You'll hev ter go back ter Trigger Bar ef ye want ter deal with yer men," he said.

"I'm going back now."

"Ar' ye crazy, Kit?"

"I hope not," smiled the girl. "You forget that I have but seven days in which to ferret out and punish."

"Thet's a hull week."

"Yes."

"Let ther camp settle down first. Moonshine an' his panther pard hev'n't quieted down yet. Ther hull Bar must be talkin' about yer now."

Before Kit could reply, there came the sudden twang of more than one bow-string, and with an oath, the burly figure of the Californian fell past her, and dropped at the foot of a rock.

"I said them red dogs'd come back!" he said, raising himself on his knees and drawing a revolver. "The hull trail's full ov 'em, Kit. They're bound ter go ter Trigger Bar!"

Fortunately the girl detective had not been pierced by the feathered shafts.

She sprung toward the red-skins while Dandy Dash still spoke.

"Cowards! I am here," she exclaimed. "While I hold a pistol you shall never strike first at Trigger Bar."

She saw dark figures on the trail ahead, and the next moment she was emptying the contents of her revolver among them.

Her marksmanship proved that she had not set out on her dangerous trail unprepared, for each bullet sped straight to its living target, and at each report a red-skin reeled away.

Fearless and steady of nerve, Kit advanced, firing as she went, not at random for show, but with discerning aim for effect.

"White Face got owl-eyes, an' kin shoot in the dark!" exclaimed an Indian.

"You forget that I have an oath to keep!" was the retort.

A minute later the trail was clear.

Against the rocks that bordered it lay five motionless figures, and in the hands of each a well-strung bow, from which another shaft would never hunt a heart.

After a moment's inspection of her deadly work, the blue-eyed detective went back to the mountain Hercules who was leaning against a rock.

"How many?" he asked.

"I counted five."

"Five Injuns in five shots! By Jumbo! Kit, thet shootin' 'd do Buffler Bill credit. Thank Heaven! their arrers missed you, but they couldn't serve me thet way without puttin' themselves to a deal ov trouble. Look hyer!"

As he finished, Dandy Dash threw back the fold of his jacket and the girl leaned forward.

She uttered a cry when her eyes fell on the feathered shaft that was sticking in the giant's chest.

"Ther pesky arrer slid atween ther seams ov my 'Frisco vest," he said, with a grim smile.

"An inch either way, an' it wouldn't hev hurt me. My vest will turn a bowie."

"The arrow will not kill you?"

"Kill me, Kit? No! I'm goin' back ter Trigger Bar afore I die."

CHAPTER VI.

SIERRA PHIL'S TRAIL.

"THE kid got clean away last night, Cyclone, an' he hed help, too."

Cyclone Tom turned to the speaker, between whose legs stood his inseparable pard, the famous panther of Trigger Bar.

"Who helped him?" asked Cyclone snappishly. "Show me the chap what coaxed the spring pink from the shanty. I left him thar last night, an' went back ter Strawberry's; but when we

got to ther cabin, as you know, he war gone. Spit out ther name of ther chap what warned ther boy!"

"Yonder he comes now."

Cyclone Tom looked over Moonshine's outstretched arm and saw a youth approaching, leading a wiry young horse which had just been bridled.

"Thet's Sierra Phil, Moonshine!" exclaimed Cyclone. "Yer don't mean ter say thet he posted ther boy?"

"Thet's jis' what I mean."

Astonishment shot from Cyclone's eyes.

"Thet boy wouldn't do such a thing ez thet. He's been under my eye too long."

"You don't know all about 'im, then," retorted Moonshine. "What did I find up in ther mountain jis' ez day war breakin'?"

"I don't know."

Moonshine turned his back upon Sierra Phil, and opening his dingy blouse, displayed to Cyclone's gaze an object which drew a gleam of recognition from his dark eyes.

"Ther boy's gold pin—ther nugget I hed fixed fer him in 'Frisco!" fell from his lips.

"He hed it yesterday hyer."

"I know thet, Moonshine."

"He lost it up in the mountain last night."

Cyclone seemed thunderstruck.

"You found it thar, Moonshine?" he suddenly asked.

"I picked it up at a place whar two persons held a confab no later than last night. If ther boy hedn't been thar, ther pin would not hev been lost whar I found it."

Cyclone's gaze went beyond Moonshine's shoulder and fell with a fierce glare upon the handsome, though dark-faced youth, who by this time had almost joined them.

At the same time he held out his hand for the pin and received it from Moonshine's fingers.

"Don't push matters," whispered Moonshine. "Take some ov thet lightnin' out ov yer eyes, an' let ther boy think thet we know nothin'. He'll guide us ter ther posey we dealt with last night."

Cyclone's face indicated acquiescence, and his hand closed on the lost pin, which was nothing more than a golden nugget.

"Which way, boy?" he asked of Sierra Phil, who had reached the spot the pair occupied.

"I'm going to try my hand at a bear-hunt."

"Up in the mountains?"

"Yes."

"Hev yer struck a trail?"

"Not exactly, but grizzlies have been about, and there's nothing to do at the Bar."

"Mebbe you'll find Kit Keene."

The eyes of both men were fixed on Sierra Phil's face as Cyclone made this observation.

Not a movement of betrayal frustrated the youth.

"I may strike his trail instead of a grizzly's," he said; "but I'm of the opinion that he's far away by this time. The Bar didn't suit him, it seems."

"Thet's ther way it looks," said Moonshine. "We're willin' ter let 'im go ef he'll agree ter keep off. We don't want any gal-faced Jonahs hyer; we kin git along without 'em—can't we, Cyclone?"

"Sart'inly. Ef yer see Kit, Sierra, jes' tell 'im thet we kin spare his presence from Trigger Bar."

"I will tell him, but I'll not find him. He's nearer Shasta than the Bar just now."

As there was no reply, the youth led his horse on and presently vaulted upon his back in full view of Moonshine and Cyclone.

"What d'ye say now?" asked the former.

"He helped the youngster off."

"Nobody else did. They're goin' ter meet somewhar, er Sierra's goin' arter his nugget. Foller him, an' find Kit Keene!"

Moonshine stepped back into the shanty before which they stood.

"I'm ready now," he resumed, reappearing a moment later.

"Whar ar' ye goin'?"

"Arter Sierra."

"Ter find Kit?"

"Yes."

"Tell me one thing, Moonshine," said Cyclone, seriously. "What makes you hate the boy thet came ter Trigger Bar fer ther first time last night? You never saw 'im afore then?"

"Never in my life, Cyclone; but I've got a curiosity that gnaws at my heart like a rat. Thet young persimmon would hev shot Santa last night ef you hedn't stepped in an' headed him off."

"Is thet why you hate him, Moonshine? Honest Injun, ain't thar suthin' back ov this?"

The panther's pard could not look his companion squarely in the eye.

"Thar's nothin' back ov it," he answered, but in a tone that did not satisfy Cyclone. "When a man threatens Santa he r'iles me. Ther purp's blood is mine. Thet young fellar would hev spilled it last night."

"Who did you say he looked like when he stood at Strawberry's counter?"

Moonshine started.

"I said he looked like Eva Bridger, ther gal thet got away ther night we got rid of ther Jonahs ov Los Pinos camp. But I don't care about thet, Cyclone. I want ter find him! Sierra will give me ther trail. Thet b'ar-hunt ov ther boy's ar' all bosh."

"I b'lieve thet, Moonshine. Trail him ef ye want ter."

"Thet's jes' what I'm goin' ter do."

"Don't touch Sierra Phil, Moonshine."

Cyclone's eyes were burning with a menace.

"I've risked my life fer thet youngster," he went on. "He's ther only livin' creature I care fer, an' he's part ov Cyclone. You may trail 'im, Moonshine, you may foller him a thousand miles, but I will call to a terrible account ther man what touches him. By Heaven! I'd kill you, Moonshine, ef you wronged thet boy!"

"Yer brother!"

"It makes no difference who he is," was the quick retort. "I've done enough fer ther youth ter call 'im my son; but I call 'im brother because I want ter. Thar, you know what I mean. Now foller him, an' see ef he leads ye to Kit Keene."

"Ain't you goin', too?"

"No; you're goin' ter hev company." Cyclone glanced at the panther. "Me an' thet

purp never hev been pard; thar's bad blood between us somewhar. I war with you on a trail once, an' you know we didn't git along at all."

While Cyclone spoke the panther eyed him, and occasionally showed his teeth like a displeased dog.

Moonshine laughed at his companion's last remarks and turned away.

"Santa an' me will find ther daisy I'm lookin' fer," he said over his shoulder. "Sierra Phil will find him fer us instead ov a grizzly. We'll report afore long, Cyclone."

Cyclone's eyes followed the strange pards of Trigger Bar until several shanties intervened and hid their forms from view.

"Thar's suthin' more than ther boy's visit ter ther Bar last night in Moonshine's head," he murmured. "He's been too willin' ter talk ov thet Christmas night at Los Pinos camp since Kit Keene went away. Thar's six ov us left out ov ther forty pards thet wiped out them Bridgers. Death hez been busy with ther old crowd since then."

Cyclone sauntered away as he finished, and when he crossed the threshold of Strawberry's den and greeted the gamblers at work beneath its roof, he had probably forgotten Moonshine and his mission.

The bully and his four-footed companion had not stopped once on their way to the mountain trails.

"I mustn't touch Sierra Phil nor you, neither, purp," suddenly ejaculated Moonshine, looking down upon the noiseless stepper at his side. "We'd r'ile the perticular Cyclone ef we did. But we're goin' ter find Kit, pard; you an' me hev never failed in a hunt yet, an' we've been pards too long ter fail now."

An hour later Moonshine suddenly stopped and seized the panther's collar.

"Huntin' fer his lost breastpin, eh?" he ejaculated, his burning eyes fastened on a person who, holding a horse by the bridle-rein, was examining the ground a short distance ahead. "Thet proves who helped Kit off last night. An' we're not ter touch thet young traitor, purp, because Cyclone calls him his brother."

The person watched by the strange pards was Sierra Phil, who continued to search for the lost pin, entirely unsuspecting of the espionage to which he was subjected.

At last he rose with a look of disappointment on his face.

"Thar he goes ag'in, this time fer his daisy pard!" exclaimed Moonshine, as the youth vaulted lightly into the saddle. "We'll foller him to ther end ov ther trail."

A bend in the mountain trail at that moment hid Sierra Phil from Moonshine's sight, and he and the panther glided forward again.

The road was very rough, and the youth, even though well-mounted, could not make rapid headway.

All at once the ringing report of a rifle cleft the air, and, with an almost human scream, Santa, the panther, sprung upward and fell at Moonshine's feet.

The Bully of Trigger Bar recoiled with a wild oath, and then started forward, a revolver in each hand.

"Me pard an' me are one!" he shouted fierce-

ly, as he stood astride the writhing beast. "White-livered coward, Moonshine wants revenge!"

There was no reply.

The echoes of the rifle-shot died away, and Santa got upon his feet again.

All at once Moonshine stooped and picked the panther up.

The beast howled piteously as he was touched, and wound his forelegs around Moonshine's bronzed neck.

"By my life ye shali live—live ter bite ther hand thet touched thet infernal trigger!" grated Moonshine, as he lowered his face to be licked by the panther's tongue. "I put ye on yer pins arter ther Sioux hed given ye six arrers, an' I'll repeat ther job."

It was a strange sight.

The panther did not growl while Moonshine examined his wound.

From a rock a few yards overhead the author of the almost deadly shot looked down upon the scene.

"The next time I'll kill!" he said to himself.

CHAPTER VII.

SILVER MANUEL'S PET.

IN his anxiety for the welfare of his strange pard, Moonshine seemed to forget the youth he was trailing at the time of the shot.

He could not see the marksman, but that person saw him from the bush-fringed cliff or rock overhead.

"Yes, Moonshine," he repeated, vengefully, "the next time I'll kill, and it may not be your four-footed pard, either."

The speaker held in his hands the beautiful repeating rifle with which he had stretched the mountain cat growling at his master's feet.

"I thought you'd trail me," he continued, his dark eyes still fixed on Moonshine. "I saw by your eyes when I came up to you and Cyclone in camp that something war up. You think I'm goin' to the girl—to Kit—and you would reach her by trailing me. You'd better go back to Trigger Bar, Moonshine. Take your pard back and nurse him back to health, if you can, but don't attempt to follow me; you might get hurt."

The youth—for a youth the speaker was—continued to gaze at the two pards of Trigger Bar a while longer, then turned abruptly on his heel and left them to themselves.

A short distance from where he had fired the shot, and back on the mountain trail he found a horse which he mounted and was soon moving on again.

"I mayn't find Kit, but I'll try," he murmured. "Moonshine is determined to find her for some purpose. He does not suspicion her sex, I'm sure of that; but if he did he would not leave her trail. She will halt in this country. Vengeance will keep her here, and safety will not guide her to the Shasta region. Well, while I can keep a trail and handle rifle and revolver, Kit Keene shall not be friendless."

If Sierra Phil had dreamed that the trail he traveled would never take him to the fair object of his solicitude, he might have turned aside to grapple with a grizzly in order to carry a trophy of the hunt back to Trigger Bar.

At that very moment there was emerging

from Sure Shot Canyon a dark-skinned young girl mounted on a jauntily-caparisoned mustang of the breed found in Southern California and New Mexico.

Her hair was very dark, somewhat coarse, and touched her shoulders, and her garments, which were somewhat fantastic in color and make-up, like those of the better class of Mexican women when in the saddle, rendered her an attractive person.

She guided the little mustang straight toward Trigger Bar, and soon found herself riding down its one main street with the rough pine shanties on either hand.

No looks indicated that she had ever been there before, but her eyes ran swiftly over a group of men who were playing cards in the shade of the tree that stood in front of Strawberry's famous den.

"Hello! hyer comes a daisy!" exclaimed one of the players, and the gaze of all instantly became riveted on the visitor. "By Jove! she's a Southern flower an' she's got inter high latitudes fer safety an' health."

Of course the game stopped, and a moment later the girl was respectfully surrounded by more than a dozen swarthy men whose gaze despite their every-day life was by no means rude.

"Yes, miss, this ar' Trigger Bar," said Cyclone, in response to the girl's inquiry. "We're ther citizens ov ther place, an' ef we ain't a handsome lot, we're regular mountain daisies when it comes ter business."

The girl who had already introduced herself as Inez Restro smiled at Cyclone's words.

"Mountain daisies get plucked like other flowers, I see, senors," she replied, with a swift glance toward the little graveyard on the mountain-side which she had just passed.

"Thet's nat'ral, miss. We're heavy on ther trigger hyer, sometimes. If ye'll stay awhile, ye'll see some citizen ov Trigger Bar planted up yonder, an' left thar with his boots on."

"I am not here for the purpose of witnessing your quarrels, but I fear I will have to ask your hospitality for a few days."

"Ask fer anything that strikes yer fancy," exclaimed Cyclone, who stood beside the girl with his dark eyes fastened upon her. "We don't see an angel's shape often hyer, but we know how ter treat one when she comes to ther Bar. I speak fer ther hull Bar when I say thet you ar' welcome hyer—don't I, pards?"

"Yes," fell instantly from the throat of every listener.

"Thanks, senors," said Inez Restro. "My father will join me here within a few days, and then I will trouble you no longer with my presence. He is coming from the north by way of Mount Shasta."

"What's his bizness?"

"He's a gentleman speculator; his Southern mines have yielded him large profits during the past few years, but not satisfied with well enough, like most men," here the girl smiled, "he has been North inquiring into certain gold reports that reached him from thence. His name is Manuel Restro, by some called Silver Manuel along the southern borders."

"I've heard ov Silver Manuel!" cried Cyclone Tom. "An' so you're his gal?"

"Yes."

"Then, by thunder! ye'r' entitled to ther best shanty in Trigger Bar, which I'm proud ter say b'longs ter me. You fetch a streak ov sunshine with yer, blamed ef yer don't, fer we hev'n't hed a female visitor hyer fer ten months, an' then it war an Injun gal."

Without another word, Cyclone took hold of the mustang's bridle, and led him away, the crowd parting to let the little steed through.

"I wish I could offer you a better house than ther one I'm takin' ye to," he said, looking up into the girl's face. "You see, miss, we're not fixed fer strangers, especially females ov yer stripe. Hyer's yer home. It's not a palace ner a 'Frisco brown-stone front, but it's yer home ez long ez you want ter inhabit it."

Cyclone had stopped the mustang in front of the identical shanty which Kit, the Girl Detective, had occupied the evening before for a short time.

Inez Restro's eyes seemed to light up with a glance of recognition.

"It's plenty good enough for me," she said quickly, glancing from the rough structure to Cyclone, who stood ready to help her from the mustang.

"Father will more than thank you for this shelter when he comes. No! I can alight alone," and the next moment the girl stood on the ground before Cyclone, having gracefully left the saddle and reached *terra firma* without the assistance of his bronzed hands.

In another minute she was in possession of the shanty, and the mountain rough led the mustang away.

"She's ther Jim-dandiest yaller gal thet ever struck Trigger Bar," exclaimed Cyclone to the group of men whom he rejoined when he had attended to the wants of the girl's little steed. "Down on ther big ranch near Sante Fe she hez twenty servants and smokes ther best cigarettes in the market, fer she's Silver Manuel's pet. But she rides all the way hyer ter meet her father, right through ther best grizzly an' Injun kentry on ther globe without a scratch ner an inch ov fringe missin'. Them New Mexican daisies ar' grit when they need it, an' Silver Manuel's pet ar' no exception."

There was a general disposition to concur in Cyclone's observation, and finding that no one took issue with him, he went on:

"She kin shoot thet rifle she carried across her saddle—I'll put up my last ounce ov dust on thet. Ef Sierra Phil war hyer, an' he'll be hyer soon, we'd git up a match 'twixt ther two young people. Phil ar' no slouch with ther repeater, but I think he'll find his match when he tackles ther Restro gal."

The sun was sinking slowly behind the ragged peaks back of the California town, but the game which the girl's visit had interrupted had not been resumed.

Some of the players had adjourned to Strawberry's counter, but a number were left outside to listen to Cyclone Tom.

"Whar's Moonshine?" suddenly inquired one of the men, and then added with a smile before an answer could be made: "He'll call thet gal another Jonah ef he takes a notion."

"It'll do him no good," said Cyclone, the

fierce light of menace appearing suddenly in his eyes. "He mustn't call everybody Jonah because they don't suit him."

"Thar comes Moonshine now!"

Every one who heard these words turned toward the mouth of Sure Shot Canyon, in the direction of which the speaker was gazing.

"An' he's carryin' Santa!" ejaculated Cyclone. "What hez happened to ther purp?—shot by Injuns ag'in?"

Moonshine came on rapidly with the body of the panther thrown across his shoulder in a manner that brought its head against his broad chest.

"Look hyer!" almost roared the bully of Trigger Bar, halting suddenly in front of the astonished crowd, and snatching the panther from his breast and holding him at arm's length, almost into their very faces.

A low whine of pain sounded on the air before a man replied.

"Santa wants vengeance, an' he shell hev it!" exclaimed Moonshine. "Ther bullet thet hit him hit me! Ther onery skunk thet shot Moonshine's pard shall feel his teeth an' claws. I'm goin' ter set 'im on his pins ag'in jes' fer thet purpose. It war ther shot ov a coward—ther mean vengeance ov a mountain skunk!"

Moonshine's eyes blazed like two globes of fire; he grated his teeth savagely behind the last mad epithet.

"Who did it, Moonshine?" asked Cyclone Tom.

"I know!" was Moonshine's quick rejoinder. "I know, an' that's enough fer ther present."

At the close of his last sentence, Moonshine wheeled and almost ran toward his cabin.

"Thar'll be blood shed fer thet shot!" muttered Cyclone Tom as his eyes followed the two strange pards.

"Moonshine will cure the panther, an' then they'll both strike the trail."

Night came down upon Trigger Bar once more.

Cyclone Tom had found another cabin some distance from the one which he had given up for Inez's use.

Moonshine had not been seen since entering his shanty with his wounded pard.

He was evidently attending zealously to the beast's wants.

But all at once a shadow—it was moonlight—fell against Cyclone's door, the next instant it was burst open.

"Moonshine!" cried Cyclone, darting forward.

"Yes, it's me!" was the quick response. "Who's come to Trigger Bar since I've been gone?—who's in yer cabin, Cyclone?"

"A young girl—Silver Manuel's pet," was the reply.

"Oho!" said Moonshine, somewhat disappointed. "I thought thet gal-faced Jonah hed come back."

CHAPTER VIII.

MOONSHINE STOPS THE WRONG MAN.

MOONSHINE went slowly back toward his cabin.

He took in the girl's quarters on the way.

"Silver Manuel's pet, eh?" he murmured,

echoing Cyclone's answer. "What brought her to this kentry?"

Moonshine had halted a few feet from Cyclone's cabin, upon whose rough door the calm moonlight fell like a blessing from on high.

"Hang me if I wouldn't like ter git a peep at thet yeller beauty," he continued. "If it warn't so late, I'd—"

His sentence was broken by the sudden opening of the very door at which he was staring at that moment.

Moonshine recoiled.

The next minute the shapely figure of a young person appeared in the doorway, and, after a moment's close scrutiny, the bully discerned the well-rounded face of Inez Restro, the Bar's beautiful guest from the South.

"Purty ez a pictur'!" fell admiringly from Moonshine's lips, as he stared at the girl, who evidently had not yet caught sight of him. "Suthin' important must hev brought her alone inter this kentry. By hokey! she's seen me! Don't shut ther door, gal; I'm only Moonshine."

Rapid strides took Moonshine forward as he uttered the last words, and Inez Restro had not time to close the door ere he stood before her, one foot resting on the threshold.

"I warn't hyer when you came, but I know ye—Cyclone told me," he went on, gazing into the girl's face. "Manuel Restro's child, eh? I war on ther big ranch once, but ye warn't in ther land ov ther livin' then. I'm Moonshine, Santa's pard—mebbe ye've heard ov us." And the mountain rough drew his figure up to its full stature. "I don't want ter disturb yer slumbers, but ar' ye alone?"

"Yes. I'm to wait here for father."

"For Manuel, eh?"

"He's coming from the North."

Moonshine's eyes seemed to read the girl's inmost thoughts.

"When will he come?"

"Within a week. I shall cease to trouble Trigger Bar then."

"It's no trouble, miss. We don't hev female visitors often—thet's why yer presence puzzled me; but ef ye'r' Silver Manuel's child," Moonshine's emphasis seemed to express a doubt, "why, ye kin stay hyer till ye git ready to go. No charge, an' no trouble."

The speaker's foot left the wooden door-sill, and he stepped back as if to depart, but kept his keen eyes still riveted on Inez.

"Go back an' sleep, miss," he resumed. "I've got bizness whar my pard is—bizness that'll rob me ov sleep till mornin'!" He grated the last words forth. "You didn't shoot Santa—no, you wouldn't do such a thing ez thet, gal; but the skunk what did shall pay fer it. I know him!"

Moonshine turned on his heel and started off without bidding the young girl good-night.

She gazed after him with a look wholly unlike the one she had bestowed on Cyclone and his companions a short time before.

"He doesn't know me," she said in a whisper to herself. "He think's me Silver Manuel's child, and so do the rest of Trigger Bar's hard crowd. I told the youth last night that I'd come back soon, and I'm here now in a disguise

that baffles the keenest eyes. The first of the seven days has closed, and I am alive among the men I came hither to ferret out and deliver over to justice. What to-morrow will bring forth no one knows, but I must not shrink from the future; no! no! my oath binds me to the work of vengeance!"

The door closed, for Inez Restro had stepped back into the cabin, and Moonshine was about to cross the threshold of his own uncouth abode, where in the dim light of an expiring lamp lay the wounded brute, for which he would have shed every drop of his blood.

Like a restless, murder-haunted man, Moonshine suddenly reappeared at the door of his shanty.

"He may come back to-night," he exclaimed, glancing at the revolver clutched in his right hand. "He doesn't think I know who gave Santa that ugly wound. I didn't at first, but I didn't leave ther mountains till I hed found out. He will come through ther canyon ef he comes at all. I will meet him thar."

Shutting his cabin door behind him, Moonshine hurried from the spot, nor stopped until he stood by the mouth of Sure Shot Canyon, some distance from Trigger Bar.

Selecting a certain place, he began a watch with the mountain revolver still in his hand.

When the moon shone it threw his shadow grotesquely against the whitish rocks, causing his heavy beard and hat-crowned head to assume shapes strange enough to startle even the brave-hearted.

All at once the bronzed watcher started.

He heard a sound that flushed his face with coming victory.

A horse was certainly approaching.

"Gettin' back from his b'ar hunt," growled Moonshine, as he listened. "I wonder how many grizzlies he met in ther mountains?"

While he gave utterance to these words, Moonshine's eyes glared fiercely down the canyon.

A few more steps, and he would be able to see the animal coming toward him.

"I swore that Santa should pay you back fer that shot, an' Moonshine never breaks his word," he growled. "In another minute, my hollyhock, I'll hev you in ther clutches ov a tiger thet never knowed what mercy war. An' ther gal what's come from New Mexico will hev ter go back without makin' yer acquaintance. It's a blamed pity; but I can't help it."

Scarcely had the bronzed watcher ceased when the outlines of a horse greeted his sight; the next moment he saw the person in the saddle.

"It's ther daisy I want—thet one thet Santa's goin' ter tear up afore mornin'!"

He leaned forward, his glowing eyeballs almost betraying him, and his finger at the trigger of the half-lifted revolver.

"By Jove! it's another man!" he suddenly gasped, for at that moment there rode from the shadows of Sure Shot Canyon into the moonlight a man who was a perfect giant, and not the boy for whose coming he had waited two hours like a statue.

Moonshine, disappointed and chagrined, stared at the person who had unconsciously baffled him.

"Hang me ef it ain't Dandy Dash, ther man what dosed Santa!" he ejaculated, under his breath. "He said he would come back ter Trigger Bar, an' hyer he is. But it's queer thet he an' Manuel Restro's pet should come hyer about ther same time. It means suthin'—it's more than accident."

If the man who had just emerged from Sure Shot Canyon had looked to the left and pierced the shadows thrown by the huge bowlders there, he might have seen the man who was regarding him—he might have caught sight of Moonshine there; but he was gazing straight ahead toward Trigger Bar.

"An eye fer an eye!" suddenly shot forth the bully, springing forward. "Dandy Dash, I'm glad you've come back!"

The man in the saddle turned quickly and his hand half-drew a revolver.

"I've got ther drop on yer, Dandy!" said Moonshine, as he thrust his weapon upward, almost into the giant's very face. "An' when I hold thet somebody's a'mighty nigh eternity. You're ther pard what bet his dust ag'in' a dosed panther. Dandy Dash, only fools come back ter Trigger Bar arter doin' such a thing."

"I'm one ov the fools, then!" said the mountain Hercules, with a grim smile, as he gazed down the shining barrel of the revolver into Moonshine's face. "I'll toss with yer fer first shot, Moonshine."

"When I carry yer life on my trigger?" was the swift reply, accompanied by a derisive laugh. "Yer back trail ends hyer, Dandy."

"Thet's a lie, Moonshine!"

Quicker than Moonshine's finger was the arm that struck the leveled revolver, dashing it aside as its possessor recoiled with a wild oath!

The next moment Dandy Dash flung himself from his horse.

"We're on an equality now—both on foot!" he flashed. "No tossin' fer first shot! The man what gits ther drop wins, an' I've got it!"

The loud report of a revolver, the one at the end of Dandy Dash's outstretched arm, awoke the sleeping echoes of the canyon, and with his own weapon falling from his grasp, Moonshine fell back from the deadly flash.

It was the work of ten seconds—Dandy Dash's attack, the leap to the ground and the shot.

"I reckon I kin go on ter Trigger Bar now," said the giant, gazing at the motionless figure lying in the moonlight. "I might be satisfied with what I've just done, but I ain't. I've a grudge ag'in' the hull Bar, an' I may be wanted thar ter help my new pard."

He turned away, coolly remounted his steed, and rode toward the mountain camp.

It might have been well for his future if he had gone back and looked at his victim.

Some men are hard to kill, and moonlight shots are not always fatal.

Two hours later and after the moon had gone down, a man sprung across the threshold of Moonshine's cabin.

The fat-lamp still flickered on the rough pine table.

"My God he's been hyer!" exclaimed the man, halting in the middle of the room, and staring at the sight that distended his eyes.

On the rough planks lay the body of a huge

panther pinned down by an immense bowie-knife which had been driven through the breast at a single blow!

CHAPTER IX.

THE GIANTS COLLIDE.

"MOONSHINE, ar' ye thar?" asked a voice at the cabin door at that moment.

The bully of Trigger Bar whirled upon the speaker.

"I'm hyer, Cyclone. What's up?"

Cyclone Tom stepped across the rude threshold.

There was a mad glitter in the depths of his keen black eyes.

"Thar's thunder ter pay at ther Bar," he said.

"Dandy Dash hez come back!"

"Thet's no news fer me," replied Moonshine, as he pointed to the panther. "This proves thet he ar'n't a thousand miles away. Santa's dead—ther best pard a man like me ever had. I war goin' ter fix 'im up ter bite ther mean skunk what shot him in ther mountain, an' he would hev lived fer thet ef Dandy Dash hedn't got hyer. Whar is Dandy?"

"I left 'im at Strawberry's—the boys hed him corraled thar."

Moonshine turned and the next moment he faced Cyclone with Dandy Dash's huge bowie in his hand.

"I'm ready fer ther bloodiest picnic Trigger Bar hez ever seen!" he grated, striding toward the door.

"Wait a minute, Moonshine."

"Not a second."

The bully of Trigger Bar had passed the threshold; he was in the main thoroughfare of the mountain town.

"By heavens! he shall listen to me!" exclaimed Cyclone, springing after him.

In another instant the bronze hand of Cyclone Tom arrested the bully's progress by closing on his arm.

Moonshine turned half-way round, with a growl.

"What did ye do ter Sierra in the mountain?" demanded Cyclone, meeting Moonshine's flashing eyes with a look of undaunted courage. "Answer me!"

For a moment Moonshine seemed disposed to let himself be drawn into a deadly altercation with his old comrade, but sober thought prevailed.

"I didn't see ther boy, Cyclone," he said, "consequently I did nothin' to him."

"His hoss came back without 'im."

"No!"

"It's a fact! We've been pards fer more than twenty years, Moonshine," there was a strange calmness in Cyclone's tones. "Thet boy ar' dearer to me than ther closest friendship I ever found. Woe to ther man what hez touched him! I guess ye'r not to blame for ther bloody saddle Nightshade brought back from the mountain."

Cyclone's hand fell from Moonshine's arm as he finished.

"You kin go an' find Dandy Dash," he continued. "My trail leads to Sierra Phil."

"Ar' you goin' alone?"

"Alone!"

Cyclone Tom turned away, leaving Moonshine at liberty to proceed to Strawberry's den where he expected to find the slayer of his panther pard.

He saw the lights of the place and heard rough voices before he reached it.

His deadly weapons still remained in the leather belt that encircled his waist; but he carried unsheathed the fourteen-inch bowie.

With determined visage and an eager, tigerish spring he entered the drinking-den.

"Hyer's Moonshine now," greeted him.

"Great heavens! I thought I settled you at the mouth of the canyon."

The eyes of the last speaker met Moonshine's glare, and the two enemies stood face to face.

Moonshine stepped toward the mountain Hercules and suddenly lifted the crimson bowie.

"Ar' thet yer knife?" he demanded.

"Thet's my knife," was the instant reply.

"I thought so, Dandy. I'm hyer ter give it back!"

Fully expecting a collision of the deadliest kind, the crowd stepped back and left the two men in the middle of a ring of mountain roughs.

There was a cocked revolver on Dandy Dash's hip, but his hand did not seek it.

He turned coolly upon the men on his right.

"Who's got a bowie ter spare?" he asked.

Nobody answered, and all eyes seemed to wander to Moonshine for permission.

"Give 'im one, somebody," exclaimed the Bully of Trigger Bar. "I want ter fight him on equal tarms?"

A long-bladed bowie was immediately unsheathed and extended to Dandy Dash by one of the men.

The knife was a match for the one clutched by Moonshine's hand.

The mountaineer received it with an eagerness that told an earnest desire on his part to accommodate Moonshine with a fight.

A moment later without a signal, but simultaneously, the right foot of each man glided forward until the toes almost met.

Their figures had been drawn upward to their full stature, and they presented a picture of giant duelists not soon to be obliterated.

Since Moonshine's request for some one to hand his antagonist a bowie, neither had uttered a word.

The only opening through the crowd was a narrow lane which ran toward the door.

Suddenly Moonshine raised his knife, keeping his eye fixed on Dandy Dash, who from the first had watched him with the eyes of a lynx.

"This is fer ther blow ye gave my pard!" fell suddenly from Moonshine's lips, as his arm descended, and the red-bladed bowie shot toward Dandy's neck with precision and force.

The result of that stroke would have been instant death if the lynx-eyed mountaineer had not checked it as suddenly as it was delivered.

Dandy Dash's left hand met the avenging arm in mid-air.

Both men recoiled.

There was a glare of triumph in Dandy's eyes.

"Try thet ag'in an' mebbe you'll hev better luck next time," he said. "I wanted ter toss yer

fer first shot down at ther canyon, but yer wouldn't. I'll do it yet!"

"Never! we'll settle our accounts with the knife."

"Suit yerself about it, Moonshine," said Dandy Dash. "I'm not hard ter please."

Maddened beyond measure by his repulse, Moonshine again sprung forward with an oath.

"Look out this time, Dandy! I hold yer life's discharge in my hand."

The crowd, hard as it was, involuntarily drew back.

The two enemies this time would collide like rival locomotives; Dandy Dash could not arrest the threatened blow.

The Hercules was seen to brace himself.

He saw only the bronze desperado rushing down upon him.

In another instant the two men met.

There was a swift, deep blow and they parted again.

Moonshine held but the hilt of his bowie in his hand and Dandy Dash was recovering from the assault.

"A steel vest, eh?" flashed Moonshine staring first at the bladeless weapon for a moment and then at Dandy Dash. "By Heaven! we kin ridle them things hyar with our six-chambered settlers. Yer skull's not bullet-proof, Dandy."

The hilt fell from his hand and the heavy revolver was jerked from its leathern pocket.

It flew upward while Moonshine's last word still clung to its echo.

The crowd behind Dandy Dash fell back, but the mountaineer did not recoil an inch.

On the contrary, he shot forward.

The giants met again, but there was no report.

It was strength against strength—strength combined with agility.

The lynx-eyed mountaineer hit the mark his hand aimed at.

It was Moonshine's wrist—the one just behind the revolver.

With a lion's strength he flung it upward, bearing its owner backward at the same time. He was fast becoming the master of the situation.

"I didn't exactly come hyer ter kill!" he hissed into Moonshine's face. "I wanted ter keep my oath—thet I'd show myself in Trigger Bar one ov these days—thet war all!"

"You must kill or get killed!" was the retort.

"If thet's ther case, I'll kill!"

He charged Moonshine anew with his last word, seized the revolver he still clutched with the imprisoned hand and wrenched it away, flinging it across the counter.

The crowd swayed forward.

"Stand back!" commanded Moonshine. "No man shall interfere in my fight."

These words while Dandy Dash held the advantage!

Moonshine struggled on only to discover that his enemy possessed greater strength than he was capable of exerting.

He was forced toward the door, down the narrow way fringed with 'anxious faces, beneath which dark, brown hands clutched revolvers.

All at once a new actor appeared upon the scene.

The figure of a young girl suddenly reached the threshold of the gambling-den; the next moment it halted beside the two men.

"Unhand him!" the girl exclaimed, as her hand fell upon Dandy Dash's arm.

That was enough.

The next moment Moonshine stood free, his wild eyes staring into Inez Restro's face, and his brain filled with wonderment.

The girl did not speak to him, but addressed Dandy Dash again.

"Leave the Bar, sir!" she said, sternly. "This quarrel was of your own seeking. You forget some things very soon."

The mountain Hercules made no reply, but moved toward the door.

"Don't let 'im off thet way because Manuel's pet hez interfered!" cried a voice behind the old mountaineer. "He would hev wiped Moonshine out—"

"He shall depart alive! I will kill the man who lifts a revolver against him!"

The men who had turned upon Dandy Dash suddenly halted, and stared into the calm face of the girl who was covering his retreat.

Inez faced the crowd with leveled revolver.

"Keep on—leave the Bar!" she sent over her shoulder to Dandy Dash. "I hold six deaths in my hand."

The old mountaineer replied with a glance and kept on.

CHAPTER X.

A STEP TOWARD VENGEANCE.

"I GUESS you did Moonshine a good turn arter all, gal," said the bully of Trigger Bar to the fair young person whom he followed from the rough den shortly after her interference with the intended death-grapple between Dandy Dash and himself. "You shall stay hyer jes' ez long ez you like an' ther men what touches yer will find an enemy in Moonshine."

Just the faintest smile appeared at the corners of the girl's mouth while Moonshine spoke, and beneath her raven lashes her eyes seemed to twinkle victoriously.

"You're goin' back to the shanty, eh?" asked Moonshine, continuing as Inez kept silence.

"I have no other abode," she said. "Besides, it is good enough for me. Father will join me here ere long, and then we will turn our faces southward."

Moonshine watched her closely, but it was evident that he suspicioned nothing.

His glances were full of admiration, for if the dark-faced bully of Trigger Bar had a tiger's nature and a tiger's eyes, he was not insensible to the power of beauty.

He still lingered at the girl's side, following her like an admirer loth to quit her presence.

"When will Silver Manuel come?" he asked, anxiously.

"Within six days, I think."

"From the north?"

"From the shadows of Shasta."

"Over the Shasta Trail?"

"Yes."

Moonshine remained silent for a moment.

"He does not travel alone?" he said, when he spoke again.

"Quite alone."

The mountain bully started slightly.

"It's a dangerous trail, miss, but then Silver Manuel's no slouch with the trigger," he continued. "He's been North afore?"

"Often."

"Then he knows the Shasta Trail about ez well ez anybody in this kentry. I'd stake all my dust on Silver Manuel gettin' through safe."

"I have no fears for his safety. We shall soon meet and then—as I have said—for the old *estancia*!"

By this time the humble quarters assigned to Inez by Cyclone Tom were reached, and the girl paused at the door that stood open.

Moonshine stepped back, feeling that he had followed her far enough, but lingered still.

"You're safe hyer, miss, ez I hev told yer," he said. "Don't think erbout danger, even ef this ar' Trigger Bar, the roughest, hardest an' meanest place in Californy. We'll all stan' by yer. You did Moonshine a sarvice to-night, an' when you did thet you helped yerself to the eternal friendship ov the old Lasso League."

Did Inez start slightly and fix her eyes on the darkened face of the speaker?

"The old Lasso League?" she asked anxiously and with well-assumed innocence.

"Didn't yer never hear ov it?"

"Never."

"Yer father used to know suthin' about it," said Moonshine with a smile. "It used ter be felt in the Los Pinos kentry; but thet war twenty year ago when it war powerful."

"Twenty years ago?" echoed Inez. "You do not mean to say that all its members are living to-day?"

"Bless ye no, gal," exclaimed Moonshine. "Thar be but six ov the old gang left, an' strange ter say we're all hyar at Trigger Bar."

"But six left, you say?"

"Only six; but it's a bad half-dozen ter tackle, miss—a thunderin' hard set!"

"You're one of the six, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes! Ther rest ar' Cyclone, Cypress Cad, Steel Hand, Brazos Ben, an' Tampa Dick—daisies all ov 'em, men ov grit, an' pards ov steel!"

Inez seemed to repeat the names as Moonshine mentioned them, but not a sound dropped from her tongue.

"Where are the rest of the Lasso League?" she asked suddenly.

"I never kept a record," was the answer, followed by a cold laugh. "We left them everywhar. Arter we quit the Los Pinos diggin's we got the Vigilantes on our track, an' some ov the old League went under. Then, we lost some when we followed Cyclone inter the Injun kentry arter the captive called Sierra Phil. We kept on losin' an' losin' 'em until to-day but six o' the band ar' able ter press a trigger."

The girl listened with increasing, but not suspicious interest.

"You are not molested now?" she said.

"No, an' we hev'n't been fer years. Californy hez forgotten our sins, miss, though I guess we never repented of a single one," and Moonshine

laughed until a strange glitter stole into the girl's eyes.

Her hands clinched as she regarded the master of Trigger Bar, who confronted her in the cool starlight of approaching dawn.

"I'll go back whar Santa is," he suddenly resumed, ending his laugh rather abruptly, and before Inez could make a reply of any kind, he had supplemented his resolution with a bow and a "good-night," and had turned away.

The eyes of the girl followed him until his figure disappeared.

Then, with an audible ejaculation of satisfaction, she turned into the cabin.

"He went away at last!" exclaimed a voice which made Inez turn quickly.

"Heavens! are you *here*?" she exclaimed, observing the dim outlines of a human figure.

"I thought I told you to quit the Bar?"

"So you did, but I didn't go, Kit."

"Hush! not that name here! Recollect that I am now Inez Restro."

"By hokey! I forgot! Whar war my head? I'll think afore I speak arter this. No, Inez, I chose to remain hyer, fer I wanted to see you. Ef you hadn't put in an appearance when you did I might have finished Moonshine."

"And gained my everlasting hatred."

"I would hev deserved it, too. I'm glad you came. Moonshine lives fer you."

"He is my prey!" and if the girl had stood in the starlight, Dandy Dash would have seen her eyes glitter. "I have won a great victory to-night. I have advanced swiftly toward vengeance. I drew Moonshine out."

"I war listenin', girl."

"I know the wild names of the wilder members of the old Lasso League, the once death scourge of the beautiful Los Pinos country. I will not forget one of them! As Moonshine called the roll of his associates—his bronze pards—I engraved the name of each on my heart. I will meet them face to face, Dandy Dash, and spot each one. Are you ready to obey me?"

"Try me!" exclaimed the mountain Hercules.

"I will. I have not played detective for nothing. Moonshine did not suspect. Red Robe's avenger's shall hear from me before the close of the seventh day; then Gray Arrow and his red-men may descend upon Trigger Bar, and blot it and its wild citizens from existence, and I—I, Dandy Dash," the girl's hand fell upon the mountaineer's arm, "why, I shall go back with my oath fulfilled and the past avenged!"

"I hope ter be able ter ride back with yer, Inez," said Dandy Dash. "You kin count on me!"

The girl did not reply, but drew from under her jaunty jacket a sealed packet which she dropped into the bronze fellow's palm.

"Take this to the spot I mentioned yesterday," she said. "You need say nothing to the man to whom you will deliver it. He will know that the time is at hand, that I am almost ready to strike. You will come back at once, and meet me two nights from this where we parted last night."

"I'll be thar."

"It is a long ride."

"I know my hoss."

"The road is paved with dangers."

"Thet's nothin' to me! I'm helpin' you to get even with Moonshine an' his pards fer suthin' they did long ago—helpin' you ter keep yer oath, an' thet's enough fer Dandy Dash ter know. I'm off, gal!"

The next moment the blue-eyed detective was alone, and Dandy Dash was trying to beat the dawn to the mountains.

CHAPTER XI.

CYCLONE'S HUNT.

It was time, as Cyclone Tom had told Moonshine, that the horse ridden by Sierra Phil to the mountains on his pretended bear-hunt, had returned riderless to Trigger Bar, and with blood-marks on the saddle.

Up to the moment of Cyclone's start on hunt of the youth, nothing had occurred to solve the mystery attached to his disappearance.

Cyclone knew that the bear-hunt was a mere sham, that Sierra Phil's real object was the recovery of the lost breastpin, and the finding of the young person whom he had helped from the place.

The hunter left Trigger Bar well-armed—fully prepared for a successful grapple with either bears or Indians. He had met them face to face before.

His keen eyes kept the trail made by the youth's horse in returning from the mountains, and ere long he found himself among the elevated plateaus and passes.

The day was beginning to fade, but he kept on, spurred with a burning desire to find his *protege* before dark.

But that luck was not to attend Cyclone.

Night settled down over him deep among the mountains.

He was miles from Trigger Bar.

"I know thet Nightshade came back without Phil," he said to himself. "Thar war blood on the saddle an' blood on his mane. I'm afraid it b'longed to ther youngster; but I will find him."

It was not until midnight encountered Cyclone that the old member of the Lasso League began to despair.

The Sierras were full of trails, trails which the stars scarcely showed him any longer, and he was almost as tired as his horse.

"I'm not goin' back without 'im," he exclaimed resolutely. "By hokey! I'll die hyer, but what I find ther boy. Mebbe Moonshine touched 'im. I don't wanter think ov thet, fer I'd hev ter settle with him ef he hez! Moonshine, ef ye've laid yer finger on thet pard ov mine, I'll fidget the old Lasso League an' make ye sweat fer it."

Cyclone had concluded to suspend the hunt till dawn, and was hunting a resting-place for his horse, when the clear sounds of hoofs ringing over a stony mountain road fell upon his ears.

The horse was approaching from toward Trigger Bar, and neared him rapidly.

"Thet means suthin'," said Cyclone, after listening a moment. "Mebbe it's Moonshine."

Dropping the bridle-rein, for he had alighted,

and clutching a revolver which he had hastily cocked, he glided back to the trail which he had left a moment before.

"He's struck this trail sart'in, whoever he is; I'll know su'thin' in a minute, er git half an ounce ov lead in my noggin."

The horse came on.

Cyclone knew that he carried a man on his back.

It was now nearly dawn.

Far away the first faint streaks of approaching day were appearing along the rim of the horizon.

All at once Cyclone Tom transferred the revolver from his right hand to his left.

In another moment he sprung at the horse that had reached his post, and his hand grasped the bridle-rein as he uttered a "halt," in tones stern enough to frighten the most fearless.

"Hello! stopped a'ready!" exclaimed the man on the steed. "Who ar' ye?—Cyclone, by hokey!"

"Yes, I'm Cyclone," uttered the mountaineer. "Your voice sounds familiar, but—"

"I'm Dandy Dash. Look here, Cyclone. No shootin'. I've got ther drop on yer!"

It was true.

Cyclone had been covered by a huge navy, and that before he had time to lift his own weapon.

"I reckon I'm goin' on!" continued Dandy Dash, with a grim smile of triumph as he gazed down into Cyclone's face. "I hed made calker-lations fer bein' stopped afore I git to ther end ov my journey, but I didn't expect ter run ag'in' you, Cyclone."

"Whar 'r' ye goin'?"

"Mebbe thet's my bizness, but I've an idea thet ye'd be benefited by knowin'. I've been to ther Bar—I said I'd come back, you know—an' when I've done my duty I'll go back ag'in, mebbe. No, Cyclone; I can't tell ye whar I'm goin'. Really, it wouldn't do. Jes' drop thet line!"

Although the last sentence was spoken in apparent good-humor, Cyclone knew what would follow if he refused to obey.

His hand, therefore, fell from the bridle-rein, and he stepped back a foot.

"Go on," he said to Dandy Dash. "I'll see you when you come back."

"I hope so, Cyclone," was the quick response and Dandy straightened once more in his saddle, though he did not cease to cover Cyclone with the revolver.

In another moment the horse had executed a great bound forward, and the man from Trigger Bar was left bewildered and perplexed on the lonely trail.

"It warn't Moonshine by a long shot," he ejaculated, gazing down the road over which Dandy Dash was urging his steed. "He's quicker than a flash, an' he's ov ther stock thet shoots at ther drop ov ther hat. He either did some bloody work at ther Bar to-night, er he's off on an important mission. Mebbe him an' Silver Manuel's pet ar' pards; but would thet gal take up with such a chap? I don't know about that," after a short pause. "Them New Mexican gals hev strange pards sometimes."

By this time the sound of the horse's hoofs

had died away in the darkening distance, and Cyclone stole back to his own steed.

Daylight came back to the mountains by degrees, and Cyclone gradually distinguished his surroundings.

His hour's sleep had prepared him for the trail marked out during the moments of darkness.

He would find Sierra Phil before the sun went down again!

"Hello! who's thet yonder?" fell suddenly from Cyclone's lips.

He was staring at a human figure which had emerged from the mouth of a mountain cavern at least fifty feet beneath his position.

"It looks like Phil, but—"

At that moment the person turned his face upward, and Cyclone started back speaking the name of the youth for whom he had hunted nearly all night.

It was certainly Sierra Phil.

In a short time Cyclone left the spot and began to descend the trail in order to join his *pro-tege* before he could get out of sight.

Eagerness and joy filled Cyclone's eyes.

Sierra Phil had been found at last!

"The youngster's livin', thank fortin'!" exclaimed the mountain man as he pushed forward. "He'll go back ter Trigger Bar with me; then let Moonshine touch him if he dare!"

Another minute brought Cyclone to the level of the trail on which Sierra Phil stood.

All at once the sharp cracks of several rifles broke the stillness.

"Injuns!" grated Cyclone, whipping out his revolvers as he leaped forward.

He saw Sierra Phil stagger back into the cavern from which he had lately emerged, and with fiendish yells of savage triumph a dozen red-skins rushed toward the place.

"Not while Cyclone's hyer, reddies!" shouted the man from Trigger Bar, as with a bound he planted his burly figure squarely before the cavern and pushed his formidable weapon forward.

"Yellow Face here!" ejaculated the Indians, hesitating for a moment.

"Yes, Yaller Face ar' hyer, an' he's hyer ter kill!" was the fierce retort.

Cyclone's eyes fairly blazed as he threw his figure forward.

Death looked over the polished barrels of his revolvers.

"You want ther boy I took from ye once, eh?" he exclaimed. "You can't hev him!"

The next instant the mountain revolvers began their work.

The red-skins drew back but Cyclone Tom kept on.

"I've got ther drop on ther hull pack ov yer!" he kissed. "When I fool with a trigger somebody gits hurt. I never knowed it ter fail. Shot ther boy, did ye? I'm payin' yer back with ther interest thet kills!"

The bravest red-skins could not withstand such deadly havoc.

Not for a moment while he talked did Cyclone cease to operate the terrible weapons he kept thrust forward.

The narrow trail was already blocked with dead bodies, and a minute had not elapsed since the first shot.

At last the Indians broke and turned.

They were but four to run away.

Cyclone sent a loud shout and a parting shot after them, and the hindmost threw up his hands and fell back, shot through the head.

"I l'arn'd ter shoot in the Los Pinos kentry!" said Cyclone, viewing his deadly work for a moment. "Now I kin go back and look arter tber boy."

He turned and retraced his steps toward the cavern.

"I got hyer nearly too late, but I've saved Phil's sculp anyhow."

He was crossing the dark threshold of the cave, when his foot struck an object on the ground and almost threw him forward.

Recovering quickly, he stooped over the figure of Sierra Phil, the blue-eyed detective's friend.

The youth lay perfectly quiet.

A startling cry rung from Cyclone's lips.

Had the Shoshones finished him?"

CHAPTER XII.

BACK TO TRIGGER BAR.

CYCLONE'S heart seemed to stand still for a moment, but a brief examination showed him that Sierra Phil was not dead.

The youth soon revived, and Cyclone, in an outburst of joy, threw his great arms about him and drew him to his breast.

The mystery attached to the steed's return riderless to Trigger Bar was now explained by the boy, who described an encounter with a panther in the mountains the night before.

The beast, previously wounded by an Indian arrow, had leaped upon him from an elevated rock, torn him from the saddle, and sent the snorting horse away in a frightened gallop.

The blood on the saddle was the panther's not the boy's, and after a brief battle on the ground Sierra Phil succeeded in dispatching his opponent, having received himself during the combat several wounds but of a trivial nature.

Fortune did not desert him in the Indians' attack, although his escape bordered on the marvelous.

One of the bullets—the one that sent him staggering back into the cave—grazed his temple, another plowed through his sleeve, and a third knocked his rifle from his hand.

For several moments after Sierra Phil had finished his narrative Cyclone eyed him with eyes full of accusation.

"I want ther truth now, Sierra," he said, suddenly. "Whar's yer breastpin?"

The youth did not start; he seemed to have anticipated this question.

"I have lost it!" he said, returning Cyclone's look with a calm, honest expression.

"Whar, boy?"

"Somewhere among the hills."

"When?"

"Night before last."

"Ther time yer helped Kit away?"

"Yes."

"What did ye do thet fer?"

"Moonshine had called him a Jonah, and I knew what would follow."

"Whar is ther youngster?"

"I don't know. He went toward Shasta."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

Cyclone was silent for a moment.

"Who shot Santa?"

"I did."

"You?" Cyclone recoiled. "Fer Heaven's sake what did yer do that fer, Sierra?"

"The two pards were tracking me."

Phil's eyes gleamed with resentment.

"Is the panther dead?" he asked.

"Dead ez a mack'rel, but you didn't finish him. A bowie did ther work."

"A bowie?"

"Dandy Dash's blade! Thet dare-devil came back last night, jes' ez he said he would when he left afore. He found Moonshine watchin' fer somebody at the canyon—"

"For me?"

"Mebbe so, Sierra. Wal, him an' Moonshine got inter a tussle thar, but Dandy got ther drop an' blazed away."

"And killed Moonshine?"

"No. It war one ov them deceivin' moonlight shots, an' the bullet gave Moonshine jes' ther kind ov mark ye've got on yer temple now. Moonshine's a hard nut ter crack. Does he know that you shot Santa?"

"I think he does."

The youth's answer troubled Cyclone.

A cloud darkened his face.

"I wish some things hedn't happened," he said; "but they hev, an' can't be undid. Ar' you afraid to go back ter Trigger Bar, Sierra?"

"No!"

"Moonshine's thar."

"I'm ready to go back!"

Admiration lit up Cyclone's eyes.

"By hokey! we will go back, an' woe to the man thet lifts a hand ag'in' you! Moonshine hez sworn revenge ag'in' the man er boy what shot Santa, an' in face ov thet oath you dcn't shrink from the Bar?"

"No."

"Then we'll go back! I fancy thet the redskins lyin' down yonder 'll not trouble us unless the hull gang thet's prowlin' round hyer take a notion ter attack ther Bar. It's Gray Arrer's band—I know it—an' they want yer skulp, Sierra, an' all ther others. Wal, let 'em come! Thar 'll be a deadly picnic ther day they attack Trigger Bar. What ar' ye wantin' ter say, Sierra? Spit it out."

Cyclone saw that the youth was eager to ask a question of some kind.

"What was the Lasso League—the one that was organized in the Los Pinos country twenty years ago?"

"Who told you about it, Sierra?"

The boy did not reply.

"Thar! don't tell me if I've touched you in a tender spot," continued Cyclone, quickly seeing the effect of his words. "I think thet boy Kit knowed suthin' about the League. Ah! I hit ther nail on ther head then, Sierra. Thar's only six ov ther old League livin' now, an' we ar' all at Trigger Bar. I begin ter see through ther bull thing. Kit war a spy, ef not more. Come, Sierra, tell me the truth. I'm Cyclone—don't fergit this."

"Did you belong to the League?"

"I reckon I did. Moonshine war ther head man, an' I stepped in his tracks. Kit war more than a spy—he war somebody's avenger."

Sierra Phil did not reply.

"Confound it! I don't keer what he war!" suddenly exclaimed Cyclone, his dark eyes flashing madly as he spoke. "We ar' able ter take keer ov ourselves, ef thar be but six ov us left. What's thet gal-faced boy ter six men what hev carried their hearts on their bowies fer twenty years? He'd better keep on toward Shasta, fer it'll be worth his life ter come back ter Trigger Bar!"

"I hope he'll not come back," said Sierra Phil. "I left him on the trail that leads to Mount Shasta."

"How did ther Lasso League ever hurt him?"

"I do not know."

"We stepped on many a man's toes them days," said Cyclone, smiling. "I couldn't begin ter name ther enemies we made. But I'm puzzled ter know who wants our blood arter twenty years."

The man from Trigger Bar turned his face toward the north as he finished, as though he possessed a longing desire to follow Kit Keene, who now appeared to him in the light of a would-be avenger.

"No!" he exclaimed, suddenly, denying himself the fruition of his desires. "We'll seek ther Bar first. Come, Sierra. Watch Moonshine with a lynx's eye. Don't let him tun jack on ye. He's not in ther best ov humor, fer his pard is dead, an' Dandy Dash bez escaped with his life. I'll stand by yer ef Moonshine an' Cyclone hev been pards fer twenty years. Git ther drop on him ef things come to thet p'int. By Jove! Sierra, things hev come to a desperate pass now."

Five minutes later Cyclone Tom and his young *protege* were some distance from the cavern where one had saved the life of the other.

The breastpin lost in the mountain had been restored to its owner with an admonition to be more careful in the future, and once more it adorned the front of the youth's gray shirt.

Neither was mounted; Cyclone led his horse behind him, and as the trail was not rough, they made good progress on the road to Trigger Bar.

"Look out fer Moonshine," whispered Cyclone, as they emerged from Sure Shot Canyon, and were about to enter the mountain town.

"Don't ferget fer a moment that he knows who shot Santa. He'll never ferget it!"

This was good advice, and shortly afterward the twain found themselves once more at Trigger Bar.

Nobody seemed to notice the return, and Cyclone took advantage of this to direct Sierra Phil to a shanty some distance from the one he usually occupied when at the Bar.

Once or twice the youth was on the eve of asking Cyclone the wherefore of this proceeding, but the look that met him kept back the question, and nothing was said.

"I'm back here without having encountered her," ejaculated Sierra Phil when he found himself the sole tenant of the shanty, Cyclone Tom

having departed. "I hope she has kept on—that she will not stop until she crosses the Oregon border. My questions about the Lasso League have awakened Cyclone's suspicions. I was anxious to know if he belonged to the band she hates, the band she has sworn to exterminate for a great wrong done years ago. Cyclone has saved my life more than once. I would not have him be an object of that girl's vengeance for the world; he is my brother in more senses than one; yet, if she should come back and say, 'I must slay Cyclone,' what could I do, I who believe that her wrongs are great?"

The sun mounting zenithward that day found Sierra Phil keeping close to his quarters.

Once Cyclone visited him and said that Moonshine sat moody and grief-stricken in his shanty over the lifeless carcass of his velvet-footed pard.

Nobody dared to disturb the Bully of Trigger Bar.

"When he moves about thar'll be death ter pay—I know it," said Cyclone. "Put new cartridges in yer revolvers, Sierra. Thar's no tellin' what's about ter happen. Ther old League—what thar's left ov it—hev jes' sworn ter stand by Moonshine!"

"Did you take the oath, Cyclone?"

"No; I warn't at Strawberry's when they swore. You know what an oath means when such pards as Steel Hand an' Brazos Ben take it. Suthin' desp'rit will happen hyer to-night. Keep yer eyes open, Sierra."

The sun went down again, and the long shadows of the lofty mountains threw their cooling lengths over Trigger Bar.

Sierra Phil stood silent but watchful at the little window beside the rude door of the shanty which he had occupied almost the entire day.

"My God! who is that?" he suddenly exclaimed, as a female figure flitted by. "Cyclone told me nothing about a woman being at Trigger Bar."

With the last word the youth opened the door and stepped out.

The figure that had attracted him was still in sight.

The next moment he was gliding after it, his eyes aglow with curiosity, and his heart almost at a stand-still.

All at once the person so persistently followed halted, and the figure of a man appeared near by.

"It is Moonshine," muttered Phil. "The watch over the dead has ended; the tiger of Trigger Bar is loose again."

The youth saw the two persons meet in the dim light.

As he watched he held his breath.

"I wish you'd go back an' stick to yer shanty, gal," said Moonshine's voice. "Thar's goin' ter be somebody hurt in Trigger Bar afore mornin'. Ther old Lasso League ain't powerless ef it hev dwindled down ter six men."

There was an exclamation of surprise from the girl's lips.

"What's to happen?" she asked.

"Mornin' will answer thet question. Go back! Ther skunk what shot my pard bez come back."

That was enough.

Sierra Phil drew his revolver, and took a step forward.

"That means me!" fell from his lips. "Cyclone told me to get the drop on that devil when the time came or rue the error. The time is here! I have been marked for destruction."

The revolver shot upward as the youth concluded; his hand held it steady while it covered Moonshine's breast.

"I'll avenge Kit's wrongs here!" he said. "When you fall, Moonshine, the whole Lasso League will turn to rend me."

At that moment there was a flash and a report, and with a startling cry of pain the Bully of Trigger Bar reeled from the girl's side.

The next moment the youth was confronted by the girl whose hand had drawn a revolver.

"Who did this?" she exclaimed, striding toward Sierra Phil. "Who would force me to break my oath?"

The youth did not move.

He seemed riveted to the ground like a person confronted by a specter.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed. "That is the voice of Kit, the foe of the Lasso League. Would to fortune we had never met!"

CHAPTER XIII.

MENACED BY RED AND WHITE.

SIERRA PHIL had taken time by the forelock in firing the shot that sent Moonshine staggering back.

He had just heard the mountain bully threaten him in language that admitted of but one interpretation, and in order to save his own life he touched the deadly trigger.

For a minute he stood confounded before the young girl who was advancing upon him with a revolver in her hand.

"You have baffled me," she said, her eyes fixed accusingly upon the youth. "You have prevented me from keeping my life oath. Was it to be treated thus that I risked my life to keep Gray Arrow and his Indians from Trigger Bar—to be balked by you?"

Sierra Phil took a quick stride forward.

"I have defeated your plans, but I shot to save myself. You may have sworn to punish the person who shall balk you. I have done this; I have taken the life of the man you want. I am at your mercy. Take vengeance."

The speaker threw open the front of his jacket as he ended, and uncovered his heart for the girl's aim.

"No!" said Inez. "I have no right to take your life, but you must leave the Bar. Your victim belongs to the Lasso League; it will turn upon you. Let me remain here; this is my vengeance-ground. Go!"

Sierra Phil did not stir.

"Let the League turn upon me!" he exclaimed courageously. "I shall not move an inch from Trigger Bar while you remain here!"

"But I am not yet unmasked."

"True, but Cyclone's suspicious."

The girl detective started.

"We will cross the river when we reach it, not a moment before," she said, a moment afterward, with a smile. "Hark! men are approaching."

"The human wild-cats of Trigger Bar!" ejaculated Sierra Phil. "Go back to your quar-

ters," and he seized the girl's arm and drew her away.

"It would not do for them to find you so near Moonshine."

"I will listen to you. I must not forget that five men live to feel my vengeance."

In another instant the young people had left the tragic spot, and Sierra Phil accompanied the blue-eyed detective to the cabin she had lately left.

"Has it come to this?" exclaimed the girl, when she found herself alone once more. "What adverse fate sent that youth across my path? The man I have hunted for a year is taken from me just when I was getting ready to turn him over to justice. Dandy Dash will deliver my message and my helpers will come, but they will not witness the grand triumph I have promised myself. Sierra Phil, I almost hate you; you have robbed me of a victim."

As the hours passed away bringing no mad oaths and no cries for blood to the girl's ears, she began to grow uneasy; Cyclone's shanty threatened to hold her but a little while longer.

Had the men of the Bar failed to discover the victim of Sierra Phil's shot?

What did this ominous silence mean?

All at once the girl opened the door and stepped across the threshold.

Trigger Bar was full of shadows; she could scarcely see the shanties that made the place.

The reign of night had come again.

"I must fathom this silence," she said to herself. "Ha! Strawberry is reaping his mighty harvest. It is not an indignation meeting. Moonshine has not been found."

The Mountain Detective crept toward the spot where a short time before she had been stopped by the Bully of Trigger Bar.

As far as her observation extended, she was the only person on the street.

She was certain that she could find the place of meeting without any trouble, and when she halted it was on the exact spot.

But Moonshine was not there; the place where he had fallen was quite vacant.

For a moment the girl stood mystified and perplexed on the spot.

Where was the famous Bully of Trigger Bar?

The solution of the mystery seemed to lie about Strawberry's den; its swarthy occupants certainly knew something.

Thither Kit bent her steps.

"No sleep until I have solved this problem," she said to herself. "If Moonshine is not dead I will know it."

Two minutes later she was looking through an open door upon a scene which had been repeated night after night ever since Trigger Bar had a history.

The interior of the rough saloon was rather brilliantly lighted up with a dozen lamps supplied with tin reflectors.

They revealed the frequenters of the gambling-tables and the customers of the bar, the latter showing their stalwart figures to advantage as they talked in loud, boisterous voices over Strawberry's villainous liquors.

In vain the girl looked through the den for a glimpse of Moonshine's hard-set face and mad black eyes.

The bully was not there, but the one other leading spirit of the place was not missing.

Cyclone's athletic figure was an object nobody could overlook.

Moonshine's pard stood at one end of the counter, an uneasy, dissatisfied look in his eyes and conversing with no one.

All at once Cyclone left his station and moved toward the door.

The Girl Detective mechanically drew back as if his quick, restless eyes had noticed her.

Nobody at first seemed to notice Cyclone's sudden movement, but suddenly four men left the den as if to follow him.

"The five last members of the Lasso League!" fell from Kit's lips when she saw this. "Something is in the wind. Oh, that Dandy Dash's steed had wings! Every moment is precious. Give me but forty-eight hours of time, and Eva Bridger's child will fulfill her vow!"

Cyclone Tom passed within a few feet of her position, followed closely by the four men who did not seem anxious to overtake him.

Moonshine's pard was followed, but for what purpose?

Cyclone passed to his own shanty, which he entered without casting a single glance over his shoulder.

The four halted a few feet from the door.

Kit, the Girl Detective, could just make out the outlines of their stalwart figures, but she could not hear their low and earnest words.

"Shall we disturb Moonshine?" suddenly asked one in a raised tone. "We have corraled Cyclone; ther youngster is in thet shanty, too."

"Yes, Brazos, let Moonshine know."

Brazos Ben slipped from the little group and came toward the girl, but passed her on the right, moving in the direction of Moonshine's cabin.

Kit did not hesitate a moment; she followed the single man, anxious to know what he would discover beyond the threshold of the domicile he would soon reach.

Her footfalls did not alarm Brazos Ben.

"I will know all now!" she exclaimed, springing forward as the burly figure of the mountain rough disappeared beyond the door of Moonshine's shanty.

The next moment she was crouched against the heavy pine boards with ears on the alert and her heart in her throat.

"Shot, eh?" she heard a voice, not Moonshine's, say beyond the door which Brazos Ben had unintentionally left ajar.

"Plowed through an through, Brazos—shot like a man shoots a dog at night!" was the answer, in a grating voice, which Kit instantly recognized. "Why did I crawl hyer an' not to ther den ter rouse you all? Ah! I wanted to get strong again, away from excitement—I wanted to swear in my own shanty thet I'd hev the heart-blood ov ther young skunk what shot me. I know 'im, Brazos. I helped Cyclone get him away from the Injuns once, an' this ar' what I get fur thet work—a bullet through my life-basket. He shot Santa an' now he drops me. Whar's ther gal—Silver Manuel's pet?"

"At the shanty, I guess."

"I want her watched—do you hear me, Brazos? She never slept under Manuel Restro's roof."

The fair listener on the outside of the shanty recoiled an inch, and with difficulty suppressed a cry.

"Discovered!" she said to herself. "This is indeed more than I bargained for, but I am going to see the new danger through."

"Who is she then, Moonshine?" asked Brazos Ben.

"Thet's what I don't know," was the answer. "She's not here fer ther purpose ov meetin' Silver Manuel. Last night I thought she war an' I planned ter go up an' fleece ther old feller on ther Shasta trail. But what did she say to ther dog what shot me to-night? She asked him why he had made her break her oath. What oath, Brazos?"

Brazos Ben was silent.

"By heavens! I will find out!" suddenly exclaimed Moonshine.

"Here, help me up, Brazos. I'm not dead yet. A wounded wolf bites deepest—a dyin' rattlesnake kin strike an' kill!"

The venom in Moonshine's last sentences sent a cold chill through the girl's blood.

She heard Brazos Ben helping the Bully of Trigger Bar upon his feet.

"I'm ready now!" he said. "You say you hev corraled Cyclone an' Sierra Phil in ther same shanty? Thet means bizness. The old pard ov Los Pinos hez dared me to touch Sierra. I will show him that Moonshine ar' no coward! I never thought, Brazos, that ther old Lasso League would hunt one another; but strange things happen in Californy."

Kit drew back, for the door opened at that moment, and two figures emerged from the cabin.

Brazos Ben was supporting his stalwart friend.

"I dressed ther hurt ez well ez I could, but all ther surgeons in gold-land can't make me whole ag'in," Moonshine said. "Thet boy shot ter kill. I wonder ef Cyclone didn't tell him thet ef Moonshine got ther drop on him, he war a goner?"

"Perhaps."

Kit's eyes followed the pair, but their figures had not disappeared ere they halted.

The next instant they were joined by a third party.

"Gray Arrow hez come at last!" said this person, in startling tones. "Thar ar' red-skins in Sure Shot Canyon!"

"Not at this hour!" cried Moonshine, straightening up.

"They ar' thar, sure ez death!"

A light cry escaped the Girl Detective's lips.

"Woe to Gray Arrow, the Shoshone, if he has broken his pledge to me!"

An instant later she was walking resolutely toward the canyon.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE MOUTH OF SURE SHOT CANYON.

MOONSHINE and Brazos Ben had not been misinformed—there were Indians in Sure Shot Canyon.

In less than ten minutes all Trigger Bar knew that the place was menaced.

"Ther red-skins first, but don't lose sight ov Sierra Phil!" whispered Moonshine hurriedly to

his comrades of the Lasso League, as the roughs poured out of Strawberry's den and dispersed to their various shanties in search of their repeating-rifles ready for use there. "Let him an' Cyclone help us defend ther Bar ef they will; but don't let 'em git away. I hev marked ther youngster. Watch ther gal, too. Thet story about her waitin' hyer fer Silver Manuel ar' all an infernal sham—I know it!"

A set of more determined men than those who congregated near the one saloon never touched the trigger in northern California.

On the countenance of each, dark and repulsive though it was, was plainly written resistance to the death.

Cyclone stood on the outside of the group, with his hard-set face turned to the canyon toward which a dozen men, headed by Brazos Ben, were creeping, with their bronze fingers at the trigger.

The two men who had passed through unrecorded dangers in the Los Pinos country did not exchange looks.

They were rapidly becoming enemies.

"Sierra didn't make sure work ov Moonshine when he had the drop on him," muttered Cyclone Tom. "He winged ther bully, though, fer ef Steel Hand 'd step away he'd tumble over like a baby. By Jove! Sierra, ef we win in this tussle with Gray Arrow, an' Moonshine lives through it, you'll hev ter look out."

Five minutes passed over the heads of the defenders of Trigger Bar without an alarm.

"Why don't ther red wolves advance?" growled Moonshine, impatiently, looking up into the eyes of the man upon whose shoulder he leaned. "Brazos Ben an' his pards must be nigh ther canyon by this time, and—"

Moonshine's sentence was broken by a loud shout which came from the north.

It was a genuine Shoshone war-cry.

"They are hyer, pards!" said the Bully of Trigger Bar, in a voice of rage and eagerness. "Ther man who said thet thar war Injuns in Sure Shot Canyon didn't lie. Gray Arrow an' his red pards want revenge fer our invasion ov ther kentry three years ago. Better fer us ef we hedn't follered Cyclone then."

"He asked no man to follow him."

These words, spoken in a loud voice, caused every listener to turn upon the speaker.

It was Cyclone himself.

The rescuer of Sierra Phil stepped forward with his eyes fixed steadily on Moonshine.

Several spectators moved forward as though about to throw their burly figures between the two men, but Cyclone disappointed them by stopping suddenly and turning on his heel.

"I'm a fool," he said, audibly. "I fureget that he's Moonshine, my old pard ov Los Pinos Camp. We organized the Lasso League, an' I'd be a fool ter fight him now."

"What did he say, Steel Hand?" asked Moonshine of his supporter.

Steel Hand repeated Cyclone's words in a whisper to his chief.

"Mebbe he ain't such a fool arter all," muttered Moonshine, fixing his eyes on Cyclone, whose back was now turned to him. "We are enemies at last in our old age, an' all because ov

thet young skunk we took from ther Injun kentry."

If Cyclone heard these words—and it would be singular if he had not—he made no reply, but stood like a statue cast in bronze, with his face turned partly toward Sure Shot Canyon.

Silence had followed the wild Indian whoop.

It seemed as if a rifle had been fired in the night, to be followed by the stillness of gloom and death.

If Brazos Ben and his little reconnoitering party had dogged Detective Kit's steps toward the lofty-walled gulch, they would have witnessed strange scenes.

With a threat on her lips against Gray Arrow, if he had broken the promise made a few nights before on the mountain trail—the pledge that he would not lead his warriors against Trigger Bar for seven days—the young girl pushed toward the canyon, eager to encounter the band.

She kept nothing in view but the fulfilling of her oath.

She knew the men to hunt whom she had ventured alone in the Trigger Bar district—the six remaining members of the infamous Lasso League—and she had vowed anew that they should feel the vengeance of the daughter of one whom they had wronged in years gone by, and on a spot far remote from their present abode.

Kit—we need call her Inez Restro no longer—came suddenly upon the red-men, who almost filled the mouth of the canyon.

"The men-wolves sleep," said a voice, while the girl crouched beside a boulder, and listened and looked, pistol in hand and with lips compressed. "They know not that the braves of the Shoshone nation are near to strike the blow that will kill all. The red-men have not forgotten the big promise they made over Red Robe's body."

The speaker was not Gray Arrow; Kit knew this from the voice.

"Ah!" she thought; "I have to deal again with the young bucks of Gray Arrow's band whom he could not control. They would not help their chief keep his sacred promise. We have met before, and they know that I am not to be trifled with. Mother would not have me defend the Lasso League, but they shall not fall before a red-skin's vengeance! Dandy Dash is on his way back by this time. He is not alone. I shall keep these crimson wolves at bay till he comes!"

These were courageous, if not foolhardy words for the blue-eyed detective.

"We will waken the men-wolves!" suddenly continued the Indian. "They shall hear the war-cry, the scalp-whoop of the Shoshone in their camp!" And the next moment the air was rent by that startling yell we have already mentioned.

It sounded so loud and shrill that Kit almost sprang erect.

"Forward! braves of the Shoshone lodges! The men-wolves of the mountains have heard the cry of death. Remember their foray into the village of our nation when the moon hung low!"

A half-naked figure bounded forward and alighted at Kit's feet!

"I am here!" spoke the girl, as she rose in front of the Shoshone. "I again stand between you and Trigger Bar! You have left Gray Arrow alone in the mountains; you would have him break his pledge; but he would not. Hate and vengeance could not wait seven days."

The red-skinned leader recoiled from the glistening revolver that was thrust into his face.

"A white squaw!" he exclaimed. "Gray Arrow made no peace with the girl."

"Ay, but he did!" was the quick rejoinder. "Go back and keep that pledge with him. The seventh day is near at hand, but I will call you before it comes."

"Leaping Panther an' his braves will not turn back! Stand aside, white girl!"

"I will not! Go back!"

The next moment the Indian's hand darted quickly at the girl's arm; but Kit's eye was too quick for him.

"You die where you stand!" shot madly over her lips, and from the fire that leaped from the revolver the rash young Shoshone reeled with a death-cry.

"Help ther girl, boys. She's grit to ther backbone."

Kit heard these words spoken by some one a few feet in her rear, and hard upon them came the reports of rifles, and revolvers, from which the astonished red-skins recoiled with yells of battle.

"No quarter, boys! This tussle settles ther fate ov Trigger Bar! Give ther red wolves Californy lead an' make Sure Shot Canyon feel proud ov its name!"

Fast and furious, the mountaineers, led by Brazos Ben, emptied the chambers of their deadly Winchesters among the savages, who, after the first moment, replied with spirit.

Kit dropped behind the huge boulder for protection, but her arm thrust the revolver across it, and helped the men of the Bar.

It was, as Brazos Ben had declared, the final battle for the mastery of that wild region.

The Shoshones had not traveled hundreds of miles over the trail of vengeance to be driven back now without a terrible struggle.

The little party of whites soon received reinforcements.

Moonshine's men pushed forward at the first shot.

At their head towered the giant-like figure of Cyclone Tom.

"We'll stay hyer as a kind ov reserve force, Steel Hand," said the bully to his supporter, and Moonshine clutched his revolvers with a firmer grip, and his eyes flashed with more madness than ever, as with his face turned toward the battle-field, he awaited the issue of the desperate conflict.

"I'm afraid, Steel Hand, thet ther days ov ther Lasso League, ar' about numbered," he said, suddenly.

"Yes, almost at an end, Moonshine."

CHAPTER XV.

THE LOST AVENGER.

THERE was one other person at Trigger Bar besides Moonshine and Steel Hand who was not

engaged in the battle raging between red and white at the mouth of the canyon.

This was Sierra Phil.

"They're at it at last," dropped from his tongue, while he listened to the reports of Winchester and revolver. "Cyclone must have joined in the fight. I wonder what Kit thinks of all this?"

He stood at the door of one of the wooden shanties as he spoke, but a moment later he was moving away.

A short walk carried him to the cabin lately occupied by the girl detective.

Cyclone had told him that he had given his own cabin up to her.

The youth looked surprised when he saw no one listening in front of the door, listening breathlessly to the sounds that had startled him.

He pushed the door open and called "Kit" several times, but there was no reply.

"She must be near the fight," he said, drawing back. "Her oath will carry her into danger, and Heaven forbid that that lovely girl should be sacrificed by a wild vow."

He turned away with the gleam of a purpose in his eyes.

"Where she is, I should be. If she is in danger I will assist her. I've shot Moonshine, but what of that? He belonged to her, she said; but the human wild-cat had marked me. I got the drop on him; that was all, and in touching the trigger, I did what ninety men in every hundred would have done under the circumstances."

He was more than twenty yards from the empty cabin, and his face was turned toward Sure Shot Canyon.

"You mustn't go down ther', fer it's all over."

Sierra Phil turned like a flash upon the speaker.

"Cyclone!" he exclaimed, in a voice of astonishment. "What is all over?"

"The fight—the fate ov Trigger Bar is settled. Thar! what does thet mean?"

At that moment a series of unearthly yells seemed to shake the very spot on which they stood.

"The red devils have won!" exclaimed the youth.

"Thet's it, Sierra," and Cyclone Tom smiled. "They held ther best trumps. You mustn't go down thar, I say."

The speaker's hand held the youth's arm like a vise.

"But the girl—Ki—Silver Manuel's child!" he cried.

"Let her go!"

"I cannot, Cyclone."

"Wal, she's gone, anyhow."

"Dead?"

"Worse than thet, ef I'm a jedge. Look hyer, Sierra. What fetched *her* to ther Bar, an' who is she? Don't try ter stuff old Cyclone with the story she told when she came hyer—thet Silver Manuel bizness. She's hyer fer suthin' else. Tell me—no shammin', Sierra; this ar' no time fer thet."

Sierra Phil found the penetrating eyes of Cyclone Tom riveted upon him.

He dared not equivocate, yet he did not want to unmask Kit.

Cyclone was one of the members of the Lasso League, consequently one of those desperadoes whom she had sworn to hunt down.

While he hesitated—just a minute—a few scattering shots sounded in the direction of the sanguinary canyon.

They did not affect Cyclone; his eyes did not lose their glitter nor their prey.

"Ain't you goin' ter tell me?" he suddenly exclaimed. "Thet gal ain't Silver Manuel's pet no more nor I am, Sierra."

"You are right," said the youth; "but you will pardon me if I refuse to unmask her."

Sierra Phil uttered his words in a calm voice, back of which was an unfaltering resolution.

"By Jove! it's ther first time you ever dared me!" cried Cyclone Tom, eying the youth from head to foot, and mentally admiring him. "I needn't press ther matter—I kin see that in yer eyes, Sierra; but the gal—I guess she won't hurt any ov us now."

The next moment Sierra Phil jerked away from Cyclone's grasp, and sprung toward the canyon where white and red lay dead within a few feet of one another.

"You can't find ther gal!" exclaimed Cyclone, bounding after him. "Ef you want ter hev a tussle with them red devils stay hyer a minute an' you'll find yer hands full. They held all ther trumps, I say."

Sierra Phil halted, but did not turn to Cyclone.

He knew that the men who had won at the mouth of Sure Shot were advancing upon the town itself.

"Thet's right; keep yer scalp on, an' live ter pay Gray Arrer's demons back!" said Cyclone Tom. "Hyar comes ther boys what lived through it."

At that moment a little squad of men, not more than ten in number, came in sight.

Cyclone halted them.

"Let an Injun smell blood an' he's worse than a wolf," hissed a stalwart rough whose left arm hung limp and useless at his side, proof enough that the red-skins had "winged" him in the late bloody fight. "All this grew out ov yer raid inter their kentry fer thet boy yonder, Cyclone. He's responsible fer ther bloody end ov Trigger Bar."

The speaker's outstretched hand covered Sierra Phil as he spoke, and the fierce eyes that looked over it menaced the youth with more than a tigerish glare.

"Yes, it's all on his account, Cyclone!" continued Brazos Ben. "It's true that ther old Lasso League came out ov ther scrimmage alive ter a man, but we don't owe thet young cub any thanks. Don't you think, Cyclone, thet you've paraded it with him long enough?"

"Thet's my bizness," was the answer shot through clinched teeth. "The man what touches Sierra touches Cyclone! I reckon thet's English plain enough fer anybody."

Brazos Ben looked over Cyclone's broad shoulder into the fearless face in front of which he had just stepped.

"Ov course it's English, but it oughtn't ter fall from Cyclone's tongue to-night," he said. "Go down yonder an' count ther pards ov Trigger Bar thet'll never lean over Strawberry's coun-

ters ag'in; an' then look inter yer pard's face an' smile—thet's all!"

"Come, boys," continued Brazos Ben, whirling upon his followers before Cyclone could shape an answer. "The Lasso League has still a chief!"

"Go to him!" said Cyclone under his breath. "Moonshine owes his life to the star-beams that fell one time on Sierra Phil's revolver."

The two persons—Cyclone and the youth—watched Brazos Ben and his companions disappear without exchanging a word.

"Fate is helping Kit keep her oath," the youth said to himself. "Vengeance is watching over the lives of the men of Los Pinos camp."

He was interrupted at that moment.

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder and forced him to the ground.

"Hyar they ar'!" said Cyclone's voice. "Ther rest ov ther fight ter-night ain't our affair."

The bitterest enemies Trigger Bar ever possessed had entered the place.

"Let 'em finish ther tussle—let 'em take full vengeance fer our work in their kentry!" whispered Cyclone Tom, as his hand encircled Sierra Phil's wrist just above his revolver, and with flashing eyes he continued to stare at, as if counting, the Indians who rushed past.

"Now fer another place, boy," he said, springing up and dragging the youth up after him.

"Must we leave the Bar?"

"We must!"

"But—"

"We'll go by way ov Sure Shot," interrupted Cyclone, as if reading his thoughts. "Ef the gal's thar we'll find her. I've got a curiosity ter know who she is, since I'm satisfied she's not Silver Manuel's pet. I'll find out, Sierra, an' I won't ask you another question, either."

Without returning to the cabin they had left a few minutes before, the two friends hurried from the spot.

Behind them rung the wild yells of the red-skinned victors; but not a shot was heard.

What did it mean?

Had Moonshine and his pards fled the field, leaving their inveterate foes in complete possession?

"Thar they go!" suddenly exclaimed Cyclone. "Them red devils ar' practicin' on Strawberry's furniture. We'll find Strawberry himself at the canyon."

"Dead?"

"Thet's ther condition he war in when I left it, Sierra. He war one ov them men what could mix drinks an' shoot like a sinner."

Sierra Phil could not close his ears against the revel the victors of Trigger Bar had inaugurated behind them.

A regular pandemonium was being held in the old drinking-saloon.

But the youth could not help thinking of the blue-eyed detective.

Cyclone had told him that the girl had met with a fate worse than death.

Her trail, then, had ended without the fulfillment of the wild vow which had brought her into the Sierra Nevada country.

Gray Arrow's braves would not wait till the

close of the seventh day, but they had burst like a tornado upon the men-wolves of Trigger Bar, sweeping nearly all of them to doom, and causing the relinquishment of a vow registered on high.

"I am left," muttered Sierra Phil when he thought of these things, and he shut his hands hard as he spoke. "I will register an oath on high and see whether I live to keep it. I know for whom she hunted. They all live. I will begin where Kit left off. This oath of hers shall yet be kept—to the letter!"

Suddenly Cyclone turned upon the youth as though he had heard his last muttered sentence; but the next moment relieved him.

"Ef we can't find ther gal you won't go inter hysterics, eh, Sierra?" he said with a curious smile. "Thar ar' other beauties in Californy. 'Frisco's full ov 'em, an' we'll be thar afore long."

Sierra Phil did not reply.

The beauties of 'Frisco possessed no charms for him.

At that moment thoughts of love were furthest from his heart; vengeance alone animated his breast.

"What d'yer think ov ther field?" abruptly said Cyclone.

A cry of astonishment fell from the youth's lips.

He stood on the bloody field of Sure Shot canyon.

Near him lay the mountaineers who had given Trigger Bar a reputation which no other settlement in the Golden State dared to claim.

A brief examination told him that the Shoshone braves had taken the usual trophies—every man had been scalped!

He turned quickly from this scene upon which Cyclone was gazing with the eyes of a man whose revenge would prove terrible.

"They didn't die alone, Cyclone; see here!" said Phil. "The Indians have left their dead behind."

The rough of Trigger Bar turned to the scene indicated by the youth's finger.

The dark red forms lying at the mouth of the canyon told how deadly had been the work of rifle and revolver.

The desperadoes of Trigger Bar had not perished unavenged.

In another instant Cyclone was among the Indian dead.

"Scalp fer scalp, Sierra!" he cried. "Them devils down at ther Bar shall see su'thin' when they come back."

The youth turned away.

Thoughts of the Girl Detective still occupied his mind.

"Still hopin' thet the gal escaped, eh?" exclaimed a voice at his elbow five minutes later, and turning upon the speaker he beheld the familiar face of Cyclone. "I tell yer, Sierra, thet she's gone forever! Didn't I see her in ther clutches ov four red-skins in the hottest part ov ther fight?—didn't they pull her over thet big boulder in spite ov her revolver?"

Sierra Phil recoiled from Cyclone's hand.

"Then I take up her work where she left it!" he cried.

"What's thet?" flashed Cyclone springing

forward. "What work did thet girl leave unfinished?"

"The duty of avenging the Christmas victims of Los Pinos camp."

"I thought so from ther minute I made up my mind thet her story about waitin' fer Silver Manuel war a hoax! Wal, ef you're goin' ter take up her work, Sierra, cut in. I b'long ter ther old Lasso League. I war at Los Pinos thet night!"

Sierra Phil did not move.

CHAPTER XVI.

SIERRA PHIL'S SHOT.

RIDING hard over one of the wild trails of the Sierra Nevada were sixteen well-mounted men who looked like California Vigilantes.

Night was falling over the landscape, but this fact did not check their speed; it seemed to urge them on, for they constantly plied the spurs, as each appeared eager to outstrip the other.

"We must be near the rendezvous," said one of the men to the rider who persistently kept the lead.

"We're nearly thar, cap'n," was the reply. "I guess I'm about ez eager ter git thar ez anybody. Suthin's happened at Trigger Bar since I left—I feel it in my bones."

"What is it, Dandy?"

"Thet's jes' what I don't know, but it's suthin'—I'd sw'ar ter thet."

"Do you think Kit will meet us at the rendezvous?"

"I hope so, but I don't know. Ef she kin, she'll be thar."

"We're all sure of that—all of us at least who know anything of the girl. She did not come into the Trigger Bar country with any expectation of failing in her mission. She always talked to me of success; failure, I am sure, never entered her mind."

"An' fail she will not!" said the old guide, promptly, and with confidence. "I've looked inter her eyes a thousand times since I got acquainted with her, an' I allus saw victory thar. I'd bet my sculp that she comes out ov this fight on top. By Jove! she puzzled me for a while. I thought she war a boy, but thet pretty ha'r an' them soft eyes kinder gave her away. Not till I saw 'er fixed up ez Silver Manuel's pet did I give cl'ar in, cap'n, an' acknowledge thet I hed been completely sold. An' the way she faced Gray Arrer's red devils thet night told me thet she's got grit enough fer twenty men like you an' me!"

The man called "cap'n," a handsome frontiersman of forty-five, listened to Dandy Dash as the steeds galloped over the trail.

Dandy Dash had conveyed Kit's message to the man for whom it was intended, and was now guiding a brave little party to the rendezvous designated by the blue-eyed detective.

"Kit promised ter send fer you, cap'n, when she had picked out her man, didn't she?" he asked.

"Yes; and I on my part promised as solemnly to join her at any time, and wherever she chose to call me. She was not to send for me until

she had found the remaining members of the Lasso League. The men at my back belong to me, I might say; they are as eager to help the girl avenger as I am."

The galloping band kept on until Dandy Dash suddenly reined in his steed and held up his hand to keep the others back.

"We're hyer, cap'n," he said, looking into the buckskin-shirted leader's face. "This is the rendyvoo, but whar's Kit?"

The spot where the band had halted was situated high up among the mountains, but within sound of a little cascade whose waters continually dashed over whitish rocks to meander at last across the loveliest of valleys many feet below the fall.

"We're not far from Trigger Bar," said Dandy Dash, in reply to the leader's look, which was a question. "We might be two miles er so—not much more, cap'n."

"Kit may still be there."

"I think not. I've got it into my head thet suthin's happened at ther Bar since I left, an' I can't git thet notion out. Confound it, cap'n, I've been thinkin' ov it durin' ther hull ride. I b'lieve I'll go down an' see."

"I'll go along."

"Come on, then."

The Vigilantes were left where they had halted, with some instructions, and the frontiersman and Dandy Dash began to descend the mountain.

"Heavens! thar's no Trigger Bar any more, cap'n!" suddenly exclaimed Dandy Dash. "Didn't I tell ye thet suthin' hed happened?"

The listener did not reply, but pressed on.

In another minute the work of the red avengers was visible on every hand in the brilliant starlight.

Every shanty had been destroyed by the fire fiend, and not a trace of a human being was visible.

"Whar's Kit, now?" asked Dandy Dash. "It looks ter me, cap'n, thet you'll never help her keep her oath. I'm sorry fur Kit, but I kin make them red devils sweat fer their work—I've got nothin' ter do, you know."

"Maybe you'll not be called on to avenge the girl's death!" said the captain, calmly. "When do you think this destruction took place?"

"Long enough ago ter let the red vipers crawl back to their dens!" was the reply. "By hokey, I'd like ter hev been hyer when they came. The mean skunks! They promised Kit ter wait seven days, but trust an Injun, cap'n, an' you lay down to sleep by a grizzly's side."

Dandy Dash had scarcely ceased when a sound startled both men and they turned instantly in the direction from whence it had proceeded.

"An Injun!" fell in whispers from Dandy Dash's lips. "He sits his hoss like a statue, cap'n; but he's a real red-skin fer all thet."

While the mountain Hercules spoke, the Vigilante was eying the man whose half-naked figure rose above the neck of a horse not more than twenty yards distant.

"None ov thet!" continued Dandy, quickly, as he laid his hand on the revolver that was noiselessly drawn by his companion. "Thet red-skin ar' Gray Arrer himself, cap'n."

"I don't care."

"But I do! He's the red skunk what promised ter wait seven days on Kit. I heard him give his word to thet effect. Now he's hyar—he's rode right inter my presence an' I'm ther man what hez ther right ter ask him to explain."

"Do it, then, for by heavens! I'm itching to send a bullet through his head!"

During this low-toned colloquy, the red-skin had not moved an inch.

It was evident that he had seen the two whites for they could see him and it is well known that an Indian possesses the eye of an eagle.

Dandy Dash leaned forward suddenly, and the hand that shot out alongside his steed's head gripped a heavy revolver.

"Hello! Gray Arrer," he exclaimed. "You an' yer braves cleaned ther platter since I left."

There was a movement on the Indian's part.

"Mountain hunter come back, eh?" he said.

"Ef I hev'n't I wouldn't be hyer; but I'm not goin' ter waste time in perliminaries. What's become ov Kit?"

"The white boy?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Gray Arrow seeks his trail."

"Honest Injun, chief?"

"Gray Arrow's head holds no forked tongue."

"I don't know about thet. You promised ter wait seven days."

"Seven sleeps—yes. Gray Arrow's young warriors would not wait. They wanted the scalps of the white fighters of Trigger Bar. They came, gluttied their vengeance, and left again; but they did not kill all."

"Not all, you say, chief?"

"There is a camp of pale-faces in the mountain. The head chief of them all is there."

"Moonshine!" ejaculated Dandy Dash, glancing at his comrade. "Where he is we'll find what's left ov ther Lasso League, cap'n."

"Gray Arrow wants to find Kit, the white boy, that he may tell him that he tried to keep his promise, but his hot-headed bucks would not wait. He would guide her to the mountain camp."

"Wal," said Dandy Dash, seriously, "Kit doesn't live to settle with Moonshine an' his pards. We ar' her avengers. Thar's more ov us up in ther mountains. Show us thet camp, Gray Arrer, an' when we git through with its pards, yer tribe will not hev ter come down hyer ag'in ter finish ther job half-done ther other night."

The Indian thought for a moment.

"Gray Arrow believes the mountain hunter," he said. "He will lead the pale-faced men to the camp."

"To our men first," said the Vigilante captain.

The two whites rode forward and joined the Shoshone chief, who turned his horse's head toward the mountain belt, and all three galloped away.

"We're gettin' thar, cap'n," whispered Dandy Dash. "We'll finish thet gal's oath afore mornin'."

The eyes of the Vigilante were full of flashes of eager fire.

"I'd rather have her fulfill it herself," he murmured; "but as that is not to be, we will cheerfully undertake the task."

The three riders appeared suddenly to the men left in the mountains, and in a short time all were pushing forward, Gray Arrow the Shoshone leading the advance.

All at once the clear report of a firearm startled every one, and the Shoshone fell backward with a wild death-cry.

"I've been looking for you!" said a voice, and a human figure stepped into the middle of the trail a few feet ahead. "You will pardon me, gentlemen, for I know you are white men, but I owed that Indian a debt contracted years ago when I was the captive of his tribe. He was guiding you toward a secret Shoshone camp; you're not a mile from it now."

"The mean, onery skunk, Sierra Phil!" exclaimed Dandy Dash. "Blamed ef I'll ever trust an Injun ag'in!"

Gray Arrow's enemy now stood beside Dandy Dash's horse.

It was Sierra Phil.

CHAPTER XVII.

HUNTED TO THE HALTER.

"If there is an Indian camp a mile ahead, there's a camp of another sort about two miles off," continued the youth.

"Who occupy it?" asked Dandy Dash, eagerly.

"The men Kit's been hunting so long."

"Not the Lasso League, boy?"

"All but Cyclone."

"What's become ov him?"

"Cyclone has killed himself, sir."

"No!"

"I saw him do it," was the reply.

"It happened in this way: we left Trigger Bar together after the death-tussle with the Indians at the mouth of Sure Shot Canyon. Cyclone told me that Kit had fallen into the hands of the Shoshones. Of course that settles everything with her. I swore that I would take up the work where she left off, that I would hunt the men of Los Pinos camp down and make her revenge mine. Cyclone tore open his jacket and told me to begin on him. Heavens! I could not do that. Think of what he did for me! I hesitated; he laughed and called me a coward, yes, more than that. At last I found my blood growing hot. I could not kill Cyclone. I walked away and left him there. All at once I heard a revolver. I turned and ran back. Cyclone was on the ground. He had shot himself!"

"Are you sure ov thet, Sierra?" asked Dandy Dash.

"Wasn't there a revolver in his hand?"

"I don't dispute yer word, boy," was the reply. "But where did you say Moonshine an' his pard's war?"

Sierra Phil noticed the quick changing of the subject, but said nothing about it.

"I will show you," he said. "Let this be the last night of the Lasso League."

"It shall be!" said Dandy Dash, shutting his lips close behind the last word.

"Thar ar' but five ov us left now, boys, but we'll make our enemies remember us! This ain't Los Pinos camp—not by a long shot! We'll call it Camp Revenge, fer from hyer we set out ter make our foes sweat for ther past. Why, I'm worth more'n a dozen dead men. Thet young chap, Cyclone's pard, 'll hev ter shoot keener next time when he gits ther drop on Moonshine. I guess he lays his failure ter ther starlight er suthin' else like it; but Moonshine's fate war nigh. Yes, thar ar' but five members ov ther old Lasso League left, but they're five devils—five human hyenas, what'll make this wild garden ov ther world a land of death! Sw'ar, boys, sw'ar! Stand up with Moonshine an' send yer oath to the stars. It shall take in every foe we hev—thet gal included, fer by my life! she's no more Silver Manuel's pet than I be!"

Moonshine rose, not without some difficulty, and stood erect in the firelight that illumined the mountain camp deep in the heart of the Sierra Nevada.

His four dark-faced companions stood around him.

They were the last survivors of the Lasso League—Cypress Cad, Steel Hand, Brazos Ben, and Tampa Dick.

Moonshine's face had been rendered pale by his desperate wound, which seemed to have drained him of a great deal of blood.

Brazos Ben's left arm was incased in a buckskin sling, and there were other wounds among the party, which told how gallantly they had defended Trigger Bar until further defense was useless.

Moonshine's right hand went up.

His example was followed by each of his companions.

"Up with your other hands!" suddenly rung out a stern voice, so near that the five men instinctively recoiled. "You needn't take your oath, men of Los Pinos camp, for I propose to fulfill mine to-night. If you will use your eyes you will see that *Silver Manuel's pet* has the drop on you all!"

The last word was followed by a derisive laugh which made more prominent the speaker's emphasis.

"The gal, by Jupiter!" ejaculated Moonshine, for he saw just at the rim of light thrown out by the mountain camp-fire the shapely figure of the girl detective.

Her arms were thrust forward, and in each hand was a cocked revolver, which threatened the lives of the Lasso League.

"Up with your other hands, I say—quick!" said Kit, impatiently, seeing that the desperadoes hesitated. "I'll excuse you, Brazos Ben, for you are winged, but the rest must obey me. I'm here for vengeance! Don't you hear horses coming down the trail at my left? They are ridden by my friends, not yours. Dandy Dash has found Captain Halter and his Vigilantes. I sent him after them. Look at me, Moonshine. Do I look like Eva Bridger, the only person who escaped the clutches of the Lasso League one Christmas night twenty years ago in Los Pinos

camp? I am her daughter, and the sworn avenger of that night! Don't call me Kit Keene nor Inez Restro; those are but names that have helped me play detective. I have been bound by an oath for years to the pleasant duty I am performing to-night. I would that you were all here. Cyclone has escaped me; but it was Heaven's vengeance all the same!"

The Lasso League, at the mercy of the Girl Detective, held up its hands.

"We thought the Injuns got you; they certainly pulled you over ther big bowlder night afore last," said Brazos Ben.

"So they did, but an Indian victory was not destined to overthrow my vow," answered Kit, with a smile. "I eluded the Shoshones and went back to my life work. You are not the only ones who think me dead. Listen! you hear the horsemen now!"

The sound of hoofs was heard by all.

Triumph fairly glittered in the Girl Detective's eyes.

Suddenly the head horseman burst into view, and drew rein.

"A fire—the camp!" ejaculated a voice that made the girl start.

"Come forward; I am here!" she sent over her shoulder toward the mounted band. "Ah! captain, is it you? I am at the end of my trail!"

The Vigilantes advanced again.

For a single moment the Lasso Leaguers had not escaped the girl's look, and those deadly revolvers had not ceased to cover them.

"By Jove! she's bagged ther whole camp!" exclaimed Dandy Dash. "We'll relieve ye now, Kit. Hyer, boys, kiver Moonshine an' his pards!"

This had already been done, and the desperadoes raised their eyes to look into the muzzles of sixteen well-aimed Winchesters, enough to riddle them with ounce balls.

"I turn them over to you, captain," Kit said, addressing the Vigilante leader. "My oath is practically fulfilled, but I will see the end. I swore to hand the Lasso League over to California justice. Who shall say that Eva Bridger has not kept her vow?"

"By heavens! have I lived fer this?" grated Moonshine. "Yonder's the boy, too, Cyclone's young pard, who first shot Santa, my panther pard, and then plugged me! Oh, fer one second with a revolver in my hand! I'd make 'em think thet Moonshine war game to ther end. Why didn't Cyclone let Kit tackle Santa the night the purp jumped Strawberry's bar'ls?—why didn't—"

He paused and bit his lip under his dark mustache.

Moonshine knew that Captain Halter and his mounted hangmen would not spare.

Morning was not far off when Captain Halter and his mer rode southward.

The little band had increased in number since the last sunset.

Five of its members were men who were zealously guarded, men who were lashed to their horses, and completely unarmed.

"We're bound fer ther Los Pinos kentry, I s'pose?" said one of the five, glancing at Dandy Dash.

"Yes; you're goin' back to yer old camp, Moonshine," was the answer. "The old tree yer crowd used thet Christmas night ar' standin' yet, an' under it death will disband ther Lasso League. Hezn't the girl played her game about to the end?"

"Yes, curse her! If the Shoshones hadn't attacked Trigger Bar when they did, I'd be on top now."

"You suspected her, then?"

"When it was too late! But I never whimper, Dandy."

On, on rode the avengers of California.

Daylight came, and found them in the saddle, and when the sun sunk once more behind the lofty peaks of the Sierras, they were still galloping southward.

The journey ended at last.

The Vigilantes were in the Los Pinos district.

Noon found them congregated under a tree, from whose largest limb dangled five black lassoes.

We need not describe the scene that followed.

The reader knows that it was the final fulfillment of the Girl Detective's oath of revenge.

Under that tree, which twenty years before had witnessed one of the darkest crimes in the history of the Golden State, perished the last desperadoes of the infamous Lasso League!

"I can go home at last," said Kit, the Girl Detective, glancing at Sierra Phil as she rode from the spot.

"You will go with me, will you not?" she asked, turning toward him.

"You are not Cyclone's brother, although he called you such. I am glad that I was not called upon to administer justice to him because he was your friend, and he befriended me. Yes, you will go home with me!"

The youth could not refuse such an invitation, and the northern mountains lost him that day forever.

Need we say that the friendship formed during the blue-eyed detective's hunt ripened into love, and that a wedding finally grew out of the affair?

It was not until long afterward that Sierra Phil learned that Moonshine confessed to Dandy Dash that Cyclone did not commit suicide, but was killed by Steel Hand who spared him (Sierra Phil) for his master's revolver.

Dandy Dash went back to the mountains, wearing still his "steel vest."

It long remained a question in his mind whether Gray Arrow meditated treachery or not when Sierra Phil put an end to his existence.

"It's all right, anyhow," he would say to himself. "Thet girl got to the end ov her trail at last, an' ther mountains ov Californy will never hear Moonshine's revolver ag'in, nor ther growl ov his panther pard. It's what I'd call justice!"

THE END.

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